

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian.

Part 4 Founder of the Royal
Academy's So-Called
Library Committee Vol. 7

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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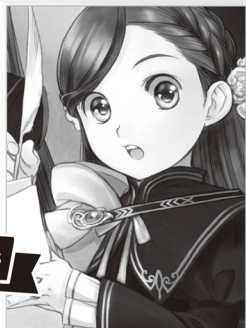




Rozemyne

The protagonist.

After growing a little, she now looks like an eight-year-old, but she still hasn't changed on the inside. She will do anything she can to read books in the Royal Academy, which she is attending as a second-year.



Ehrenfest's Archduke Candidates



Wilfried

Sylvester's oldest son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a second-year at the Royal Academy.

Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a first-year at the Royal Academy.



Rozemyne's Guardians

Ferdinand

Sylvester's half-brother and Rozemyne's guardian.

Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.

Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.

Karstedt

The commander of Ehrenfest's knights. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Three:

Rozemyne was exceedingly busy after becoming a noble, with her work as the High Bishop and the archduke's adopted daughter having left her with very little spare time. She finished the printing press, sold karuta and playing cards in the castle, and made steady progress in her aim to proliferate books. The atmosphere became a lot more tense when Georgine visited, however. Wilfried fell victim to a political trap, and Charlotte was kidnapped, during which Rozemyne almost died of poisoning. Rozemyne was soaked in a junure to recover, but when she awoke, two whole years had passed.

**Rihyarda**

Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister and a fifth-year apprentice med attendant.

**Brunhilde**

A fourth-year apprentice arch attendant.

**Hartmut**

A sixth-year apprentice archscholar. Otilie's son.

**Philine**

A second-year apprentice layscholar.

**Cornelius**

Karstedt's son and a sixth-year apprentice archknight.

**Leonore**

A fifth-year apprentice archknight.

**Judithe**

A third-year apprentice medknight.

Rozemyne's Retainers**Damuel**

A layknight. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

**Angelica**

A medknight. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

Otilie

Hartmut's mother and an arch attendant.

**Roderick**

A second-year apprentice medscholar preparing to give his name.

Ehrenfest Dormitory

Traugott.....A fourth-year apprentice archknight. Rihyarda's grandson.

Matthias.....A fourth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.

Marianne.....A third-year apprentice archscholar serving Charlotte.

Rudolf.....A fifth-year apprentice medknight serving Charlotte.

Natilie.....A fourth-year apprentice archknight serving Charlotte.

Ella.....Rozemyne's personal chef.

Hirschur.....Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Previously taught Ferdinand.
Primevere.....Klassenberg's dorm supervisor.
Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dorm supervisor.
Gundolf.....Drewanchel's dorm supervisor.
Fraularm.....Ahrensbach's dorm supervisor.

Royal Academy Professors

Solange
 The Royal Academy's
 librarian.



Hildebrand.....The Sovereignty's third prince.

Students of Other Duchies

Schwartz.....A library magic tool.
Weiss.....A library magic tool.
Arthur.....Hildebrand's head attendant.
Cordula.....Hannelore's head attendant.



Hannelore
 A second-year
 archduke candidate
 from Dunkelfelger.

Other Royal Academy Figures

Adolphine
A sixth-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Ortwin
A second-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Luzinde
A first-year archduke candidate from Gillessemeyer.
Rudiger
A sixth-year archduke candidate from Frenbeltag.
Lestilaut
A fifth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Clarissa
A fifth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.
Kenntrips
A third-year apprentice archscholar serving Lestilaut.
Detlinde
A fifth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.
Raimund
A third-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach. Hirschur's disciple.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Melchior.....Sylvester's son, making him a member of the archducal family.
Nikolaus.....The son of Karstedt's second wife.
Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Justus.....Ferdinand's scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Lamprecht.....Wilfried's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Aurelia.....Lamprecht's bride.
Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.
Henrik.....A scholar working in the printing industry.
 Damuel's older brother.

Nobles Elsewhere

Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince.
Anastasius.....The Sovereignty's second prince.
Oswin.....Anastasius's head attendant.
Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.
Eglantine.....A member of the Klassenberg archducal family.
Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Temple Attendants

Fran
In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Zahm
In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola
A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika
A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil
In charge of the workshop.
Fritz
In charge of the workshop.
Wilma
In charge of the orphanage.

Other

Konrad.....Philine's younger brother, now in the temple.
Relichion.....The Sovereign temple's High Bishop.
Immanuel.....The Sovereign temple's High Priest.
Karin.....The daughter of a Klassenberg merchant.

Lower City Merchants

Benno.....Head of the Plantin Company.
Lutz.....A leherl of the Plantin Company.
Otto.....Head of the Gilberta Company.
Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.
Theo.....A leherl of the Gilberta Company.
Leon.....A leherl of the Gilberta Company.
Tuuli.....A leherl of the Gilberta Company. Myne's older sister.

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Prologue

The tea party in the library was brought to an abrupt close when Rozemyne collapsed without even the slightest warning. Continuing was hardly an option when the host had fallen unconscious. Hannelore and Hildebrand had looked on in a daze, while Rozemyne's head attendant Rihyarda had sent an ordonnanz to summon Wilfried and Charlotte.

"Lord Wilfried, Lady Charlotte, I leave the rest to you," Rihyarda said upon their arrival. "I will bring milady back to the dormitory with her guard knights. Brunhilde, assist them in cleaning up." She curtsied to the prince, who was wide-eyed and chattering his teeth, and obtained permission to leave. Then, she said a simple farewell to Hannelore before making a brisk exit.

"Arthur, what happened to Rozemyne...?" Hildebrand asked his head attendant, shaking. "What's going on?"

Hannelore heard the prince's quavering voice and glanced over. Arthur had gone pale; he was trying to think of what to tell his lord, but his understanding of the situation was just as nonexistent.

Wilfried and Charlotte consoled the panicked Hildebrand and explained to his retainers that Rozemyne's collapse was a regular occurrence.

"Prince Hildebrand, Rozemyne often falls unconscious," Wilfried said.

"My sister's health is especially poor," Charlotte added, "but there are potions waiting for her at the dormitory that will make everything better."

Wilfried then tried to console Hildebrand the same way he had consoled Hannelore the year before, by telling him about the incidents with the snowballs, her baptism, and so on... but it had the opposite effect. The prince grew enraged and suddenly demanded, "How could you do that to her?!"

Arthur seemed to take solace in the explanation, at least; some color returned to his pale face, and he rested his hands on the prince's shoulders, urging him to stop directing his worry and panic at Wilfried.

"Prince Hildebrand, these archduke candidates of Ehrenfest know her very well," Arthur said. "If they say she is fine, we may trust that she is. You must not show your emotions so openly. Let us return as

well.”

Hildebrand was young and emotional, but his head attendant Arthur understood the situation well—because there was a royal in the room, everyone else was forced to prioritize his needs, delaying their work. He gave an apologetic look to Wilfried and swiftly concluded their farewells.

Once the prince was gone, Charlotte and Wilfried could begin attending to the remaining guests.

“Professor Solange, we apologize for having surprised you,” Charlotte said.

“Are you well, Lady Hannelore?” Wilfried asked.

An archduke candidate of a greater duchy could not allow themselves to lose their composure, and with that in mind, Hannelore repeated over and over again that she was fine. On the inside, however, she was anything but. She simply couldn’t forget the way that Rozemyne had collapsed and then remained dead still, like a puppet whose strings were suddenly cut.

Hannelore could empathize with the prince’s alarm—the year before, during the Ehrenfest tea party to which all duchies had been invited, Rozemyne had collapsed to the floor the moment she took Hannelore’s hand. She had been smiling up until that moment, but in the blink of an eye, she was unconscious. Hannelore hadn’t known what to do then, and she didn’t know what to do now. A cold sweat ran down her back as she failed to move or speak properly at all.

“Lady Hannelore,” Wilfried said, regarding her with clear concern. Hannelore had assumed that she was wearing a natural smile, but this evidently wasn’t the case; her face kept twitching no matter how much she tried to stop it.

Cordula, Hannelore’s head attendant, sensed that her lady was unable to act in a manner befitting an archduke candidate. She placed a hand on Hannelore’s shoulder and sought permission to speak.

“We were surprised by the suddenness of it all,” Cordula began, “but we are aware that Lady Rozemyne was bedridden for days immediately prior to this tea party. She asked us whether we could bring our musicians for the exchange, since she had been summoned back to Ehrenfest. It is clear that Lady Rozemyne was forced to hold this tea party despite being in such ill-health due to the prince being invited.”

Cordula’s words were spoken with such cold rationality that Hannelore’s mind finally started working again. In retrospect, Dunkelfelger had indeed been told from the start that Rozemyne would be attending this tea party in poor health.

If only you had said that sooner, Cordula... I wouldn’t have panicked so much.

Such a thought ran through Hannelore's mind, but then she realized why Cordula had not spoken until then—her analysis of the situation could easily have been taken as criticism of the prince. She could never have said such things in the presence of royalty, even if she was just trying to calm her lady.

Hannelore looked around and saw that Rozemyne's remaining attendants were cleaning up the tea party alongside Solange's attendants. It seemed best for her to leave sooner rather than later—she had calmed down enough to make that kind of decision.

“Erm, I believe we should be...” she began.

“I'll take you to your dormitory and explain things to Dunkelfelger,” Wilfried said. “Charlotte, can you handle the rest?”

“Certainly, dear brother. I will settle matters with the attendants before returning to our dormitory,” Charlotte replied, having consoled Solange and directed her own attendants to assist with the cleanup. She seemed unreasonably calm for a first-year, which Hannelore took as proof of just how often Rozemyne collapsed.

After escorting Hannelore back to her dormitory, Wilfried explained the situation to her older brother Lestilaut. “We truly apologize for startling Lady Hannelore and all those attending the party once again,” he said, referencing how the same thing had happened the year before. Naturally, everyone in the dormitory was paying close attention.

“You are not to blame for Lady Rozemyne's collapse, Lord Wilfried,” Hannelore said, putting on her best smile as she saw him off. “Please tell her that I hope she recovers soon. I am quite fine.”

As soon as the door closed, however, the strings of tension were abruptly cut and a wave of exhaustion hit Hannelore all at once. Her emotions had stirred so much that she felt as weary as she usually did after using a ton of mana. She wanted nothing more than to rest in her room, so she began heading for the stairs... but the circumstances were much too serious.

“Hannelore,” Lestilaut called out, his red eyes narrowed sharply. “Tell me what in the world happened at that tea party.”

“Brother, I would rather wait until after I have calmed down a bit...”

“You know we can't delay our report—this happened in the presence of royalty. You can remain silent and have your retainers give the details on their own, but you still need to be there. Come.”

There was no room for Hannelore to refuse when her brother was being so firm. And so, she had to go to a meeting room with her retainers before even having an opportunity to rest or change clothes.

Were I to collapse at a tea party like Lady Rozemyne, I find it hard to believe my brother would ever swiftly rush over like Lord Wilfried to take

care of things for me...

Hannelore knew there was no point in even comparing the two boys, but she couldn't help but sigh when she pictured the stern-faced Lestilaut alongside the warmhearted Wilfried.

Oh, how I wish I had a kind older brother like Lord Wilfried...

Gathered in the meeting room were Lestilaut, his retainers, Hannelore, and those who had accompanied her to the tea party.

Hannelore looked over a board she had received from Cordula—the notes her apprentice scholars had made during the tea party. Such notes were very rarely made during tea parties, since postliminary reports were delivered verbally and from memory alone, but Hannelore had deviated from the norm in an attempt to copy Rozemyne. Thus, no matter how panicked they had grown, they could still speak objectively and without missing any details. It was a very wise decision, in hindsight—Rozemyne's collapse had been so overwhelming that Hannelore hadn't been able to remember what they had been talking about prior to it.

"As I mentioned previously, I have agreed to start donating mana to the library's magic tools as an assistant. This"—Hannelore pointed to her armband as she read from the board—"is proof of that fact. We assistants are also being referred to as 'Library Committee members.'"

"A weird-looking band and a weird-sounding name," Lestilaut said quite rudely. Hannelore ignored him and continued, explaining that she had supplied mana to Schwartz and Weiss and that Hildebrand would be working with them as a member of the Library Committee henceforth.

Now, what should I say about Lady Rozemyne requesting that Prince Hildebrand do one of our jobs...?

Hannelore fell silent for a moment, taking a sip of tea to wet her mouth while carefully eyeing her brother. He was always scrutinizing Rozemyne's words and actions, so he would no doubt kick up an exaggerated fuss upon learning of the ordonnanz prompting incident. Hannelore ultimately decided to keep it hidden for now; the prince had accepted it without issue, and it had nothing to do with Dunkelfelger. If it truly was important enough to be featured in the report, Cordula would simply mention it later.

"We exchanged books," Hannelore said. "Then, Rozemyne presented us with a manuscript about Dunkelfelger's history, rewritten in modern vernacular. She wants us to make sure it doesn't contain any mistakes."

"Hm... Dunkelfelger's history, you say?" Lestilaut remarked. "Very well. I will check it thoroughly to make sure everything is correct."

Hannelore noticed the sinister grin on her brother's face and gave him the hardest glare she could muster; an unfairly critical evaluation

ran the risk of damaging her friendship with Rozemyne. She had only recently started to enjoy reading—thanks in large part to Ehrenfest books being so fun and easy to read—and the last thing she wanted was for Rozemyne to start growing distant.

Lestilaut reached for the stack of papers, but Clarissa hugged them to her chest. “I will not give them to you, Lord Lestilaut,” she declared.

“Clarissa, what do you think you’re doing?!” Lestilaut exclaimed. She wasn’t even Hannelore’s retainer—the tea party had taken place before the usual socializing period, and since Hannelore hadn’t had enough available retainers, she had recruited archnobles with free time to accompany her. Thus, Hannelore looked just as surprised as her brother.

“Lady Rozemyne sought not just for the manuscript to be checked, but for Aub Dunkelfelger to be consulted over whether it could be made into a book within Ehrenfest,” Clarissa said. “The aubs of our duchies are going to be discussing this during the Interduchy Tournament, so we must send them home at once.”

Clarissa was using the fact that archdukes would soon be involved to reinforce her point. She had been crazy about Rozemyne ever since the game of ditter the year before and no doubt wished to prevent Lestilaut’s unfair criticisms more than anyone.

As Lestilaut examined Clarissa through narrowed eyes, trying to determine whether she was being sincere, Hannelore agreed with a smile. “Clarissa is correct,” she said. “This is an urgent matter.”

Hannelore and Lestilaut glared at each other, neither person wanting to relent, until eventually Kenntrips, the latter’s apprentice scholar, cleared his throat. “I understand the situation, but as goods entrusted to us from another duchy, it is necessary that Lord Lestilaut be given the opportunity to view them as the future archduke,” he said. “Can you permit him to check them over during the following three days, so as to not interfere with the aub’s negotiations? I will assume responsibility and deliver them to the aub after three days have passed.”

Kenntrips’s suggestion seemed fair to Hannelore; she could trust her brother’s retainers a lot more than she could trust her brother himself, and if Kenntrips said he would send the manuscript home after three days, she could believe it. She moved to agree, but Clarissa still seemed unconvinced—she firmly shook her head while continuing to clutch the papers to her chest.

“If we have three days to wait, I want to spend them reading the manuscript myself!” Clarissa declared. “This is a book on history written by Lady Rozemyne! I can only imagine it is as pleasant and easy to read as all other Ehrenfest books!”

“I wish to read it too!” one of the others who had attended the tea party called out. “I’m terribly curious to see how she translated the heroic tale of Wrangeltus...”

“No, no, no!” another interjected. “Forget Wrangeltus! What about Garlshaut?!”

The others all seemed curious about one hero’s tale or another, and they were getting so heated up that they were leaving the archduke candidates entirely to the side. Hannelore couldn’t help but sigh; Dunkelfelgerians were hot-blooded by nature, and it often caused trouble.

Hannelore looked up at Cordula, who nodded and forcefully clapped her hands together. “Be quiet,” the head attendant said. “As this is a request from another duchy, the aub takes the highest priority. If we are not in a position to respond before the Interduchy Tournament, Dunkelfelger will suffer, for failing here would mean breaking a promise to Lady Rozemyne.”

Her final remark was presumably to hammer the point home for Clarissa. Cordula snatched the papers from her hands and then gave them a close look.

“These papers seem to be bound with thread. If we take care not to lose it, we can halve the pile.”

“Cordula?”

“As we are only checking the precision of this modern translation, the aub will need only half of the manuscript to make his assessment. We can send the first half to Dunkelfelger and keep the second here in the dormitory.”

Hannelore struggled to understand why Cordula was going to such lengths when she just wanted to stop Clarissa and the others from going crazy.

“Lord Lestilaut does need to check the manuscript, but we cannot deprive Lady Hannelore of seeing it when it was entrusted to her in the first place,” Cordula continued. “Please take turns reading the half that we keep hold of.”

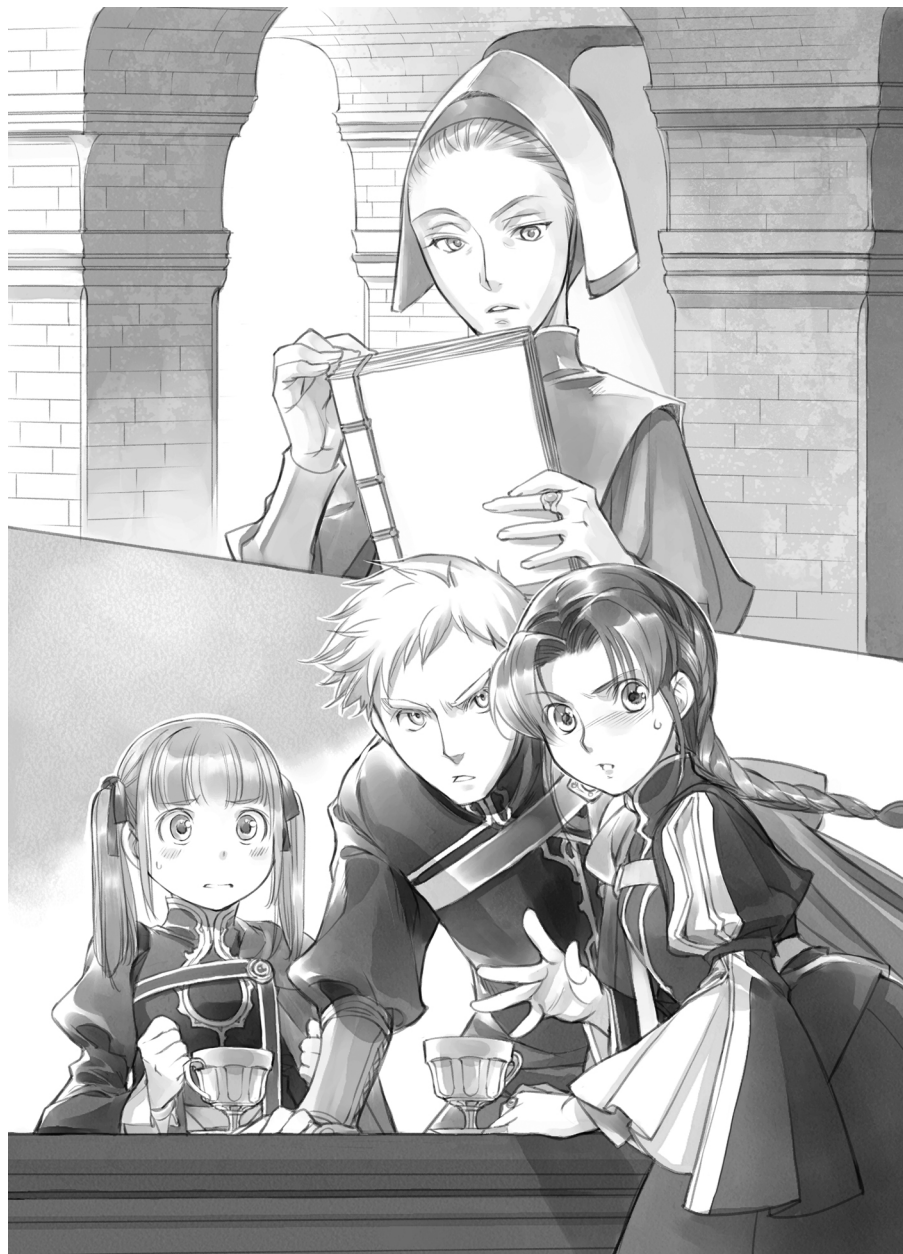
In truth, I cannot say I have much interest in reading Dunkelfelger history... I would much rather spend that time reading Ehrenfest romance stories.

But despite Hannelore’s misgivings, she did not reject Cordula’s suggestion. She knew that she would encounter problems during her next tea party with Ehrenfest if she avoided reading the manuscript entirely.

“Lady Cordula, I...” Clarissa began.

“Clarissa, might I suggest that you do your own work?” Cordula said, interrupting her. “I believe you said you were collecting stories for Lady Rozemyne, did you not? If you send them to her through

your Ehrenfest associate, she will surely be overjoyed.”



Clarissa put on a serious face as she considered Cordula's advice. "I have transcribed books to complete challenges and for greetings, but I never thought about transcribing for a get-well present. You are right, Lady Cordula; Lady Rozemyne would surely rejoice to receive stories while she is so unwell."

Hannelore was glad to see Clarissa so motivated—her fists were clenched and there was a noticeable sparkle in her blue eyes—but there was something about her words that didn't seem to make sense. She knew that Clarissa had gone crazy for Rozemyne entirely on her own at some point, but when she thought back to the tea party, they hadn't seemed to have met before.

"Clarissa, what do you mean when you say that you transcribed books to complete challenges and for greetings?" Hannelore asked. "Have you met Lady Rozemyne before?"

The young woman's cheeks reddened with embarrassment and she turned her head, causing her braid to sway ever so slightly. "Last year, I proposed to one of Lady Rozemyne's retainers in the Royal Academy," she said, "and the other day, I finally completed the challenge he gave me. I'm hoping to give Lady Rozemyne a more formal greeting at the Interduchy Tournament this year, so..."

Hannelore had wondered why Clarissa seemed to know so much about Ehrenfest as of late, and now it finally made sense—she had settled on marrying someone from the duchy. She was acting far more adorable than usual right now, as she rejoiced over her proposal having been accepted. Hannelore felt her own heart warming up just from the sight.

"I'm glad that you completed the proposal challenges you received," Hannelore said encouragingly. "Do continue to keep gathering stories; I am much looking forward to Ehrenfest making a book out of the ones our apprentice scholars have collected."

From there, Hannelore returned to the report. She noted that, while she and Rozemyne were exchanging their books, Hildebrand had mentioned to his attendant Arthur that he wanted to lend a book too. That was where the notes ended—and presumably when Rozemyne had collapsed. The apprentice scholar who had been writing must have been very disturbed by the sudden incident, since Arthur's name was cut off midway through, with the ink jerking away in a line.

"And then Lady Rozemyne suddenly collapsed," Hannelore concluded.

"Huh? But why?" Lestilaut asked.

"Lady Hannelore, surely that is not all... Are you forgetting something?" one of his retainers added, equally surprised. But there

was nothing more to say—everyone who had attended the tea party had been too shocked by the sudden event to process anything.

“It truly did happen without warning...” one of those who had attended said, backing up Hannelore. “It was as sudden as could be.”

“Lady Rozemyne’s attendants and her siblings handled the situation with trained experience, but we guests had no idea what had happened or what to do,” another added. Although they had remained silent at the time, it seemed that they had been just as surprised.

“Enough,” Lestilaut said. “I understand that Hannelore’s report was not incomplete. Do we not have even the slightest idea as to why she collapsed?”

“Lady Rozemyne seems to have been bedridden for several days prior to the tea party, and she was so ill that Aub Ehrenfest instructed her to return home,” Hannelore replied. “Cordula believes that she might have collapsed after pushing herself to attend the tea party, due to the prince being in attendance.”

“I’m impressed she can be an archduke candidate while being that sickly...” Lestilaut said, scratching his head with an annoyed grimace.

His poor attitude aside, Hannelore agreed with Lestilaut that Rozemyne’s position as an archduke candidate was peculiar. How did she perform archduke candidate training with a body that weak? Hannelore could only tilt her head in disbelief as she thought over the intense training that Dunkelfelger archduke candidates received... but perhaps other duchies trained in different ways. There was no point thinking about it.

“And that is what happened at the tea party,” Hannelore concluded once again. “May I return to my room now? My emotions stirred heavily from the surprise, and I am exceedingly tired.”

She wasn’t the only one whose emotions had been shaken by Rozemyne’s collapse—all those who had accompanied her were no doubt equally as tired. Lestilaut didn’t try to keep them any longer.

Once she was finally back in her room, Hannelore let out a sigh of relief. Cordula was helping her get changed with a sympathetic smile while the retainers who had been too busy with their classes to attend the tea party prepared tea, looking visibly interested in what they had missed.

“Professor Rauffen was quite troubled to find you all in the meeting room,” one of the retainers said. He had apparently returned after his classes to find the room locked, and it was only from the nearby students that he had learned about the tea party ending early due to Rozemyne collapsing.

“Oh my. But is Lady Rozemyne’s health not far more important than questioning her about the temple?” Hannelore asked.

“It seems he thought to have Prince Hildebrand use his royal authority to make Lady Rozemyne delay her return, but the prince refused.”

Rauffen had sent an ordonnanz to Hildebrand, only for him to respond that he refused to order someone to stay at the Academy when they needed rest in their home duchy. Hannelore, recalling how disturbed the prince and his retainers had been during the tea party, found the idea of the professor making such a request in the first place laughable; if they wanted information on temple matters, they could consult the Sovereign temple or even the temple in Dunkelfelger. Rozemyne’s health took priority, especially when she was exhausted enough to have collapsed in the presence of royalty, so Hannelore was beyond glad that her rest wasn’t going to be disturbed.

“I am relieved to hear that she will not be forced to overexert herself once again due to a royal order,” Hannelore said. “Unlike here at the Royal Academy, she will be able to rest in Ehrenfest. I hope that she gets well soon.”

A few days later, Hannelore received a message stating that Rozemyne had awoken and would promptly be departing for Ehrenfest.

Post-Return Discussion

As the swirling of the teleportation circle faded, I slowly opened my eyes. Cornelius's back was the first thing I saw; he had stood in front of me and to the side as my guard. Rihyarda let go of me now that I wasn't in danger of toppling over from nausea.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

"And so I have returned, Angelica, Damuel."

Standing in front of the crowd gathered to welcome me were my two guard knights. Damuel looked exhausted, perhaps because he was receiving training from Bonifatius once again.

Cornelius walked over to them and began the process of swapping out guard knights. "I request that you both take my place guarding Lady Rozemyne," he said. "I must return to the Royal Academy at once."

"Won't that be a struggle?" Angelica asked quizzically and turned around. She was looking at my guardians, which included the archducal couple, the knight commander couple, Ferdinand, and Bonifatius. Cornelius let out a small groan after following her gaze.

"Oh my, Cornelius," Elvira said, scooting forward to stand between the guard knights. "But do we not have much to discuss? Perish the thought of you leaving so soon after your return; please do spend at least one night with your family." She was smiling on the surface, but her dark eyes were locked onto Cornelius with deadly intensity.

"Mother... I sent my reply the other day, and I still have classes to attend. Once they are done, I will come home to talk," Cornelius said, his face twitching as he took a step back, trying to get as far away from Elvira as he could. He finished the guard exchange, then swiftly turned and stepped back onto the teleportation circle.

Elvira looked as though she had something to say, but she ultimately saw Cornelius off with a giggle. "Next time, come home with a bit more manly resolve, dear. And with your partner, of course."

Cornelius shimmered and disappeared with a grimace. He had been talking about how he wanted to enjoy his last year as a student to its fullest, but in reality, it seemed that he just wanted to avoid Elvira's probing.

"His partner?" I repeated. "Have you finally learned who she is,

Mother?"

"We may discuss this in detail during a tea party. There is much I must ask of you as well," she replied and then returned to her place in the crowd. Rihyarda subtly pushed me forward, and I moved to greet my other guardians.

"I have returned from the Royal Academy," I announced.

"I never expected you to finish your classes this quickly, Rozemyne," Bonifatius said, praising me with a grin. "My granddaughter really is in a league of her own."

I was overjoyed to receive his praise, but my achievement was solely down to me wanting to visit the library sooner, so I wasn't entirely sure how to respond. Unable to puff out my chest with pride and boast, I opted to be humble and say it was all thanks to Ferdinand's teachings.

"Rozemyne, I'm going to be eating dinner with the rest of you tonight, so how about you tell me how you slew that ternisbefallen?" he continued. "Your scholar's report said you were the star of the show."

Hartmut had sent his report while I was bedridden, so I hadn't gotten the chance to read it. Thanks to Philine, I was aware he had extolled my saintly virtues, but that was about the extent of my knowledge. I also knew that I hadn't participated in the fight much at all; my attacks had consistently missed, and I certainly didn't want to speak with Bonifatius about that.

"Of course," I said. "We can discuss how splendidly the apprentice knights handled the matter. Thanks to your training, Grandfather, they have learned to coordinate a bit."

For a moment, I considered making a pinky promise with Bonifatius, but I realized that doing so would leave me with a broken finger and immediately gave up on the idea.

Sylvester was the next to step forward. "I've been waiting for you, Rozemyne. Come to my office once you've gotten changed," he said. For some reason, his voice was completely devoid of energy. Last year, he had stomped his feet and looked downright furious, but now he seemed kind of dead inside. It was probably just my imagination, though.

Or did something happen while I was away, I wonder...?

I briefly returned to my room with Rihyarda and my guard knights, then headed to the office. Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt were awaiting me inside.

Ferdinand was the first to speak. "Rozemyne," he said, eyeing me carefully while tapping a finger against his temple, "I believe we must begin by ensuring we both have the same understanding of the word 'peaceful.' I ask, what does it mean to you?"

I blinked in surprise, having been prepared for some intense lecturing. Still, I gave his question a serious ponder.

“To me, it means days when I can hole up in the library and read,” I eventually replied. “If not for this order to return home, my life would have been the very embodiment of peace.”

My return to Ehrenfest had been ordered right after my lessons had ended and I could begin visiting the library. As far as I was concerned, it was perfectly reasonable for me to grumble and demand that they give me back my library and reading time.

Sylvester let out a heavy sigh. “We didn’t call you back on a whim, you know.”

“Rozemyne,” Karstedt added, “do you know *why* we ordered your return?”

I placed a contemplative hand on my cheek. There were three mistakes that immediately came to mind: blasting holes in the canopy of my bed with my water gun, terrifying everyone during the bookworm tea party, and passing out despite being the host. However, the letter regarding my water gun modifications hadn’t contained any criticisms whatsoever.

“I was summoned back right after the ternisbefallen incident, so maybe because I joined the battle without consulting anyone and ended up collapsing...” I ventured. “Would that be it?”

“...What do you mean, ‘maybe’?”

“I’m just struggling to understand what I’ve done to deserve a scolding. I don’t think I’ve made that many mistakes, especially compared to last year,” I said, tilting my head. It was a response that made all three of my guardians sigh.

“First,” Ferdinand said, lining up the reports from the Royal Academy, “is the way you write your reports. You can write proper reports for the printing industry and for temple matters, so why are your reports on Royal Academy affairs so poor? For what reason do you concentrate on topics of such little importance?”

I actually had a clear answer to that question. “My scholars already send you reports on what they feel is important, and it seemed kind of pointless for me to focus on the same things. I thought it would be better to go out of my way to write about the details that Hartmut skipped.”

It seemed that my concern had been wasted on them. I had also been writing my reports with the same mindset as when I was in school back on Earth and would write letters to my guardians, but that evidently wasn’t what Ferdinand and the others wanted. Instead, they needed my reports to be a lot more analytical in nature.

“I thought you would all appreciate an insight into what your children are getting up to at school, so I made my reports similar to a

diary of sorts that covered more personal topics,” I continued. “If you find this unsatisfactory, I would rather you tell me exactly what kind of report you want instead.”

“I see,” Ferdinand said. “That would explain why your reports were so overly emotional. Henceforth, write them as you do for the printing industry and focus on the improvement of our students’ grades, the spreading of trends, and the activities of your so-called Library Committee.”

With that, I finally understood what kind of reports my guardians wanted. If they needed them to be written from a work perspective, mine certainly weren’t cutting it.

From there, my guardians pointed out various other problems with my words and actions. The most substantial were centered around how I handled the members of my Library Committee. I had promised to give Hildebrand an armband without seeking permission, refused to immediately hand over the magic tools, registered him as an assistant, and tried to make him take on work.

“But he’s a Library Committee member!” I said. “What will he do if not work in the library?”

“As far as the reports say, the only work that your committee has been given is to supply mana,” Sylvester said flatly. “Prompting students to return their overdue books is not your job.”

I hung my head, feeling dejected. He was right. Solange had already seemed hesitant about giving work to an archduke candidate such as me, yet I had taken things a massive step further by suggesting that we entrust work to a literal prince. And to add insult to injury, I had done it all without consulting her first.

I’m sorry, Professor Solange!

“Ngh... Professor Solange kept saying how helpful and overall wonderful those ordonnances from Ferdinand were, so I just assumed having a prince take up the role would be even better,” I said. “The perfect person for the job, I thought.”

“It is not up to you to decide who should take on which jobs,” Ferdinand replied. “A royal may give you any order they like, but you *must not* give an order to a royal.”

After considering their words, I concluded that I had been treating Hildebrand as a comrade in arms when he was actually like the son of a CEO in a company where I was on the lowest rung of the corporate ladder. And of course, while giving work to a colleague was perfectly acceptable, giving work to the small child who was just visiting to play certainly wasn’t.

Okay, that explains why everyone froze up!

I cradled my head in regret, finally understanding what a colossal blunder I had made. Only then did I realize the consequences that the

prince continuing to hang out with us in the Library Committee would have, and it made me want to cry. Even during my Urano days, there was never a time when I had needed to interact with someone whose status was so much higher than my own.

“In that case, what should I do now?” I asked. “Would it not be a problem for me to ignore Prince Hildebrand when Lady Hannelore and I are discussing our workloads, especially when he wishes to join in our conversation? I imagine the prince will end up feeling left out, but what am I supposed to do about that?” I had simply paid close attention to his expression when talking about the armbands and reacted accordingly, but perhaps it would have been better for me to ignore it.

Ferdinand gave a very sharp frown. “You always swiftly and accurately identify what the person you are speaking to wants or needs based on minor gestures and expressions during conversations. That is not bad in and of itself—one could even call it a virtue. However, you never consider the context of whom you are speaking to or account for the intentions of those around them. That is why everyone always struggles to follow up your actions.”

I always placed all of my focus on the person I was speaking with and was more than willing to befriend anyone, regardless of whether they were royalty or from a greater duchy. However, according to Ferdinand, that generally led to me troubling those around us or creating much greater problems.

“You have what it takes to become a powerful weapon if you can learn to start taking context into consideration,” Ferdinand said, “but for now, you are little more than a danger who makes the future entirely unpredictable. This is especially true when royalty is involved; it has become impossible to say where Ehrenfest will stand in the years to come.”

I averted my eyes, aware that Ferdinand had told me to avoid interacting with royalty by any means necessary. Although I understood what my guardians were trying to say, I couldn’t make any promises.

Ferdinand, upon noticing my attitude, looked at me with a frown. “Do not look away from me, Rozemyne,” he said. “Just what are you plotting this time?”

“I can’t avoid dealing with Prince Hildebrand now. It’s too late for me to promise anything.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I plan to continue being friends with him. I was also invited to visit the palace library, and there’s no way I can throw away my chance to secure permission for that.”

Solange, Hannelore, and Hildebrand—a librarian and two

bookworms. They were the three people I wanted to be friends with more than anyone in the Royal Academy, and from this point onward, I wanted to involve myself with them as much as possible. I would accept advice from my guardians on how to go about getting closer with my new friends, but I wasn't willing to stop interacting with them entirely.

"You can forget about the palace library," Sylvester said with a harsh expression. "You passed out just from hearing its name, didn't you? If you actually went there, you'd probably collapse, fire off random blessings, and who knows what else. I'm not going to give you permission to go there until you learn to control yourself. And either way, since you're underage, you won't be able to go to the royal palace without a guardian."

"Isn't that way too cruel?!" I exclaimed, desperately looking between my three guardians, but they were all wearing expressions that made it clear they would not accompany me. This was bad—the self-restraint I had abandoned so long ago was suddenly something I needed quite severely. But how could I restrain myself when faced with the palace library? I had no faith that I could.

"The palace library..." I mumbled to myself. On the surface, it seemed as though I could go there after learning some self-restraint, but I knew it was just a thinly veiled attempt to keep me away from it permanently. After all, how could they evaluate my progress when it was impossible to gauge another person's self-restraint in the first place?

But I wanna go...

"At the very least, we can hardly let you go until you've stopped collapsing out of nowhere," Karstedt said. "You caused an immense amount of stress for Prince Hildebrand and his retainers this time, didn't you?"

In short, he was asking me whether I wanted to traumatize everyone in the palace library. I slumped my shoulders. I didn't want to do that, no. It was more than obvious to me by this point that my collapsing in front of people wasn't good for their hearts and that the follow-up was especially rough.

Gaaah. The palace library is so far away now...

"You did not seem to understand the distance you needed to keep between yourself and royalty, but that should not cause any further problems as long as you commit the fact you are not equals to memory," Ferdinand said. "Now, let us move on to the ternisbefallen."

Wilfried's report had mostly been about his excitement over his first battle, Charlotte's had offered a more businesslike perspective as she hadn't been there in person, and Hartmut's had focused on the repairing of the gathering spot while praising me again and again for

my saintly behavior.

Ye gods, Hartmut—were you possessed when writing this?!

“It was hard to believe they actually focused on the same event,” Ferdinand continued. “Tell us what happened, in your own words.”

And so I did, although it felt as though I was just filling in the details that were missing from Charlotte’s report. Ferdinand must have felt similarly, as he was actually adding notes to her report as I spoke. I tried not to look at Hartmut’s report at all.

“Still, I am impressed that one of you recognized the ternisbefallen from Roderick’s description alone,” Ferdinand noted. “It is an exceedingly rare feybeast found in Werkestock; I would not have expected a student to recognize one.”

“Leonore seems to have researched them while going through feybeast documents in preparation for last year’s ditter games at the Interduchy Tournament,” I explained. “She said they were too dangerous to be used in ditter, so they were one of the feybeasts she hadn’t taught to the other apprentice knights.”

“I once read the same documents,” Ferdinand said. “I also once heard about them from a Werkestock apprentice knight—although Werkestock has now been split between Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger and no longer truly exists.”

I went on to detail the fight with the ternisbefallen. I described how I had rushed to the battlefield to grant the Darkness blessings, how my attacks had all missed, how I had used the divine cape, and how I had regenerated the gathering spot.

“When Professor Rauffen came with the Sovereign Knight’s Order, he asked me a lot of questions, but my head was so fuzzy by that point that I didn’t manage to give any proper answers,” I said. “I ended up leaving while they were planning a date to interrogate me on the details, but Professor Hirschur seems to have worked things out for the time being.”

“What did he ask, and what did you answer?” Ferdinand probed. But when I repeated our exchange, my guardians grabbed their heads and groaned.

“He didn’t seem satisfied with my answers, and it seems like I’m going to be summoned for an inquiry soon,” I said.

“I would imagine so,” Ferdinand remarked dryly.

“But what else could I have said to him?” I asked. I knew the prayers from reading the bible, which was necessary for me to do as the High Bishop, and I could perform the healing ritual because it was done as part of my work in the temple. That was all there was to it; I had no more details to give.

“We will need to emphasize during the hearing that your prayer differs from the spell that the knights use.”

“Hm?”

“The spell that knights use is forbidden from being taught at the Royal Academy.”

“But why? Isn’t it important to know for when dangerous feybeasts like *ternisbefallens* show up?”

“Perhaps, but there is something far more dangerous than feybeasts: humans.”

According to Ferdinand, the spell for making black weapons had stopped being taught at the Royal Academy long ago. After a political upheaval that caused a mana shortage not unlike our own, some archdukes had tried to enrich their duchies by invading others with black weapons. It was an especially dangerous situation for some, as there was very little a lesser duchy could do against an invading greater duchy. Others were inspired by the invasion, and the upheaval soon devolved into even greater chaos. From that point on, it was forbidden to teach everyone the spell for making black weapons in the Royal Academy. Instead, only the Knight’s Orders that oversaw territories where feybeasts that absolutely needed black weapons to be defeated were taught it.

“How come Cornelius and the others didn’t know the spell, then?” I asked. “Isn’t it necessary for them to learn it?”

“It used to be that the Knight’s Order would teach apprentice knights once they entered the knight course and received their divine protection from the gods. Now, however, we only teach it to the fully grown knights we’ve determined we can bring with us on missions.”

“What inspired that change?”

Karstedt glanced at me and then shrugged. “As you know, we have more nobles who used to be blue priests, and the education level dropped after the civil war shook up the Royal Academy courses. For safety’s sake, we only bring knights who can properly coordinate on missions. We only teach the spell to those who’ve earned our approval.”

Ah! It’s all because of Shikza.

That reminded me—Ferdinand had scolded Karstedt for not training the newbies properly and told him to rethink how he managed them. It was after Shikza’s little rampage that the rules for training newcomers had been modified, meaning that those a little older than Angelica would know the spell, but it was completely unknown to those in Angelica’s grade and below. The current newcomers were so bad at coordinating that they wouldn’t be taught it for a very long time.

“So, what’s the difference between spells and prayers?” I asked.

“Hrm.” Karstedt considered my question for a moment. “Well, prayers are too long to use in battle. You also wouldn’t want to risk

messing up a word and then having the prayer fail to activate, so they were compacted down into spells.”

It seemed that the spells used by knights were in fact prayers that were being slowly shaved down over time. There wasn’t much room for them to be modified, unlike a full-on prayer, but the speed and lack of room for error was most important.

Huh. I guess you learn something new every day.

“Ah, right, right. This is for you, Ferdinand,” I said. “It’s a gift from Hartmut. He drew the magic circle that arose when I healed the gathering spot with a blessing.”

I handed over the drawing in question. Both Sylvester and Karstedt leaned closer to peer at it and then swiftly looked away, probably unable to understand it. Ferdinand alone traced his finger across the lines. “Rozemyne, did you pour your mana into this?” he asked.

“It rose up on its own when I performed the earth-healing ritual,” I replied. “What does it do?”

“It is a necessary component of the area functioning as the Ehrenfest gathering spot. As you might imagine, it is quite complex, with many effects woven into it,” he said, his mouth softening a little as he spoke. I could tell that he was extremely happy to see it, which made me happy in turn—namely because it meant he would probably lecture me less. Hoping to improve his mood even further, I peered at the magic circle and asked what effects he meant.

“Hold it, Rozemyne.” Sylvester, sensing that Ferdinand was about to begin an impromptu lesson on magic circles, quickly interjected with a frown. “Isn’t revitalizing the earth the Sovereign temple’s job?”

“I took matters into my own hands, since the other Ehrenfest students needed ingredients for their classes. And if my retainers had their classes stalled, it would impact my ability to visit the library.”

Maybe it was a job normally done by the Sovereign temple, but it hadn’t been a situation where I could just casually sit around. At the same time, I emphasized that I hadn’t completely stolen all of the work; the ternisbefallen hadn’t rampaged exclusively in the Ehrenfest gathering spot, so there was plenty of cursed ground in the forest.

“The problem’s not about whether you left them work—although I can’t deny that you helped out the students,” Sylvester said.

“This is an extraordinary magic circle,” Ferdinand noted. “To use it completely, dozens of Sovereign blue priests and shrine maidens would need to work for days on end. I am impressed that your mana sufficed.”

“It didn’t suffice at all,” I replied. “I needed to chug rejuvenation potions while I was restoring the earth, but it felt like my mana was being sucked out as soon as it recovered. It was really rough.”

“‘Rough’ should not even begin to describe it,” Ferdinand muttered as he continued to examine the circle, but what was done was done. “It seems that you fully regenerated the gathering spot, but did you bring any ingredients from it back with you?”

“I don’t believe so.”

The magic circle was one thing, but I hadn’t even considered bringing back any newly grown ingredients. They were there for classes.

“Instruct Hartmut to send some from the regenerated portion of the gathering spot,” Ferdinand said. “I wish to see if your mana has caused them to change at all.”

“You truly are Professor Hirschur’s disciple, Ferdinand; it seems that you prioritize your research just as much as she does,” I observed. “She came along with the Knight’s Order, but when she saw the hunt had ended without any particular injuries, she tried to return to her laboratory right away.” I added that I would have liked for her to be a little bit more worried about us, but that just made Ferdinand lower his eyes ever so slightly. “Ferdinand...?”

“Back in the Royal Academy, whenever I slew feybeasts in the forest with the apprentice knights, Hirschur would come to check on us out of concern. Her interruptions seemed such a waste of time that I would shoo her away and tell her not to bother us unless someone was injured. That is likely why.”

“So it’s all your fault!”

Ferdinand and Hirschur’s experiences had completely warped their idea of trust. At this rate, Raimund was in genuine danger. But as I worried about him, my three guardians collectively sighed.

“Forget about the Ahrensbach student; worry about yourself.”

Ah. Sorry...

Even from that point onward, I didn’t receive much in the way of a lecture; my exhausted guardians simply ended the meeting after informing me that they’d be sending me back to the Royal Academy after the Dedication Ritual, since they wanted to minimize my contact with royalty. It was actually kind of strange—not that I wanted them to yell at me or anything.

But why, I wonder? I almost want to ask, in case they’ve just forgotten. But doing that would definitely earn me a scolding of some kind, so I won’t.

They were sending me back earlier this year, since they wanted me to start working on my socializing skills once Hildebrand was confined to his room again.

I can’t say I care all that much about returning to the Royal Academy when my days are going to be spent socializing rather than in the library, though...

The only part of socializing that actually appealed to me was attending tea parties with Hannelore where we could discuss books, but I doubted anyone would permit such a meeting when I was more or less guaranteed to collapse again.

Sigh... Life never goes the way you want it to.

Dinner and a Tea Party

“Ottilie, do send this letter to the Royal Academy,” I said, meaning that I wanted it given to the knight guarding the teleportation room. It was a letter to Hartmut, asking him to gather ingredients from the regenerated gathering spot.

Upon seeing who the letter was addressed to, Ottilie made a worried expression. “Lady Rozemyne, how is Hartmut doing at the Royal Academy?” she asked. “Is he bothering the others, by chance?”

“Hartmut puts a tremendous amount of effort into gathering information and laying foundations for me, on top of diligently writing reports for my adoptive father,” I replied. “There is no mistaking that he is having a grand time at the Royal Academy. I could feel just how energetic he is through the reports I read today.”

My aim was simply to relieve Ottilie’s concerns, so I said no more on the subject. I could hardly tell her that Hartmut was starstruck by my repairing of the gathering spot and praised the gods in a fervor over me truly being a saint.

“Milady, it’s about time for dinner,” Rihyarda said. “Please put down your pen.”

I obliged and stood up. At dinner tonight, I was going to be speaking with Bonifatius about the ternisbefallen hunt.

But what should I say...? Hartmut’s report makes it sound like I was right in the thick of it all. Won’t Grandfather be disappointed to learn the truth?

My internal debate continued even when I arrived at the dinner table. Ferdinand was in attendance as well. Bonifatius was seated next to me, and I answered his questions while we ate.

“And so, from Roderick’s words alone, Leonore deduced that we were dealing with a ternisbefallen,” I explained. “I departed posthaste to bless everyone’s weapons with Darkness, but when we arrived at the gathering spot, we found it empty. The battle had moved to the forest, as Matthias and the others who had accompanied Roderick on his gathering had already lured it away. By the time we reached them, groups led by Matthias and Wilfried were stalling the now massive ternisbefallen. It was larger than Roderick had reported due to Traugott having struck it with a full-power attack.”

“Traugott, you say?” The smile disappeared from Bonifatius’s face and was replaced with a grave seriousness. “Hm...”

“Ah, but, er... He was not really to blame,” I said, hurriedly trying to defend Traugott. “The students had not yet learned what attributes ternisbefallens have.”

Karstedt grimaced; he was listening in while standing behind Sylvester as his guard knight. “That’s not an excuse, I’m afraid,” he said. “It’s on him for being too shortsighted to see the significance of Matthias and the others buying time without attacking. There were no issues this time, since everyone survived, but what could you say in his defense if the enlarged ternisbefallen had claimed several students’ lives?”

In essence, he was saying that such a tragedy had only been avoided because of the skilled students who had covered for Traugott’s mistake. I shook my head, unable to argue with that.

“We began attacking once everyone had the God of Darkness’s blessing,” I said, continuing my explanation. “I joined in, firing my water gun, but I was unable to hit the ternisbefallen even a single time. It seemed entirely focused on avoiding my attacks...”

“That comes as no surprise,” Ferdinand said, raising an eyebrow. “As far as I can understand from your explanation, this so-called ‘water gun’ of yours fires mana, correct? Weapons with the God of Darkness’s blessing steal twice as much mana from the enemy as they were infused with. It is only natural that it would focus on you more than anyone else.”

“Indeed, Rozemyne,” Bonifatius added. “You were a greater threat to the ternisbefallen than anyone else, and it was so distracted trying to evade your attacks that it became full of openings for others to exploit, right? You contributed a lot more to the fight than you know. Well done.”

Bonifatius was the pinnacle of strength, so receiving his praise was like being recognized as super strong myself. I leaned toward him slightly, pleased to hear that I had been of some use, and said, “Would stopping it in place with the God of Darkness’s cape count as contributing too?”

“The God of Darkness’s cape?” he repeated.

“The ternisbefallen was watching me too closely for any of my attacks to land, so I thought I should block its vision. I turned my water gun into the God of Darkness’s cape, which I then used to cover its head... but of course, I no longer had a weapon then, so I couldn’t even go in for the kill.”

“Did you just say that you changed your weapon?” Karstedt asked. He was the first to react.

“Yes,” I replied, “since you can change the form of your weapon without canceling the God of Darkness’s blessing.”

“No, you cannot. Once you turn something into a black weapon, it

can't be changed back until after it is dispelled."

I looked to Ferdinand for an explanation.

"That may be one difference between spells and blessings..." he said. "I am highly interested in researching what other dissimilarities there may be, but it is rare for knights to need to change weapons in the middle of a trombe hunt. There will presumably be no need for them to memorize the prayers now."

According to Ferdinand, spells were prayers that had deliberately been simplified and shortened over time to be better used in battle. This meant that, even if prayers allowed one to change their weapon, they were still much less convenient overall.

"You can use the divine instruments, Rozemyne?" Bonifatius asked.

"Yes, Grandfather. They are very familiar to me, thanks to my temple upbringing. Is something wrong with that?"

"No. It's just surprising. I don't know anyone else who can freely use the divine instruments," he replied. "Not everyone raised in the temple is alike, I see..."

Apparently, none of the blue priests who had risen to become knights had ever used divine instruments. The only blue priest-turned-knight I was aware of was the now deceased Shikza, so all I could say to that was, "Why don't they use them when they are so convenient?"

Seeing my confusion, Ferdinand set down his cutlery, looking clearly exasperated. "Normal nobles do not visit the temple, so they neither see nor touch the divine instruments. Being raised in the temple is also considered a stain on one's reputation, so no former blue priest would consider using a divine instrument as their own weapon, lest it remind others of their upbringing. And, above all else, divine instruments require an enormous amount of mana to use—an unnecessarily large burden for an average priest-turned-knight to bear."

"Not to mention," Karstedt added, "they have complex magic circles and decorations that are much too hard to replicate."

Sylvester nodded. "I've seen them on the shrines before, but I wouldn't be able to remember them clearly enough," he said.

"In addition to all this, Rozemyne—you are the only person who would view the divine instruments as little more than convenient tools to use," Ferdinand added. "They are meant to be wielded by the gods themselves; most would be too humble to use them as personal weapons."

"I don't want to hear that from you, Ferdinand!" I snapped. "You use them as 'convenient tools' way more than I do!" He was the one who had given me Leidenschaft's spear as a weapon and taught me how to use the God of Darkness's cape, so I was entirely against him

trying to saddle me with the blame.

“I recall saying that you should use the cape as a last resort—as the ultimate ace up your sleeve,” he replied. “I did not anticipate that you would use it for something as moronic as blocking a creature’s sight because it continued to dodge your attacks. Fool.”

“Ngh... I’m sorry.”

One could use the God of Darkness’s cape to absorb mana from an opponent, and with that in mind, Ferdinand had told me to use it sparingly—when I was backed into a corner and without any mana. Instead, I had decided to use it because I needed a really big cloth. It seemed our conversation wasn’t going in my favor, so I swiftly retreated to our original focus.

“Putting aside the question of using divine instruments as weapons for now, I succeeded in blocking the *ternisbefallen*’s vision, and with a triple attack from Cornelius, Wilfried, and Traugott, we succeeded in defeating the beast. I was not awarded too many contribution points, so I decided to leave the ingredient gathering to Cornelius and Roderick while I went to regenerate the gathering spot.”

“One moment, Rozemyne.” Bonifatius stopped me with a stern expression as I tried to move on from the cape. “You blessed everyone’s weapons with Darkness, drew the *ternisbefallen*’s attention, and then froze it in place by obscuring its vision. You should have received more contribution points than anyone.”

I stared at him quizzically. If that really was the case, nobody had said anything at the time. Everyone had agreed that Cornelius contributed the most, with Wilfried taking second place. Considering that I had only received ingredients for Roderick’s feystone, surely my contribution points hadn’t been that high.

“Are contribution points not distributed based on the amount of damage done?” I asked.

“Setting the stage for inflicting damage is what matters most!” Bonifatius passionately replied. “Judging by what you’ve said, you and Leonore contributed the most—her by immediately identifying the feybeast as a *ternisbefallen*, and you by giving everyone the means to start hurting it. If you give points based on damage alone, then more impatient idiots like Traugott will start charging headlong into danger, hoping to get more credit.”

The knights had apparently chosen an incorrect system for distributing contribution points. I looked to Sylvester and Karstedt for second opinions, and they both agreed that the knights had been in the wrong.

“Bonifatius is right—by focusing only on who inflicts the most damage, they’re encouraging students to rush in alone,” Karstedt said. “At this rate, they’ll never learn to cooperate properly.”

“This must be another downside to speed ditter being the only kind of ditter played nowadays,” Bonifatius said with annoyance. “We’ll need to reteach them about contribution points too. What rubbish is the Royal Academy even teaching these days?”

His words reminded me of the knights’ written lessons. “There was a study guide for distributing contribution points, so I imagine the proper system *was* taught in class,” I said. “The problem seems to be the way they’re taught it—the examples they learn during lessons are so unlike what they actually experience that they never truly understand. Leonore said something to that effect last year.”

“Cornelius was the one who decided on the points this time, and the biggest problem is that no one pointed out his mistake. Seems like they all need to be reeducated...” Bonifatius said. His special training for the apprentices was far from over, apparently.

I spent the next few days reading the book I had borrowed from Hannelore, and soon enough, it was time for my tea party with Elvira and Florencia. It would only be the three of us this time, and considering that Elvira and Florencia were basically my socializing instructors, things were a little tense.

“It’s unfortunate that you were ordered to return here so soon,” Florencia said. “No doubt you were looking forward to socializing with your friends.”

I can’t reveal that Lady Hannelore is basically my only friend and that being summoned back to Ehrenfest isn’t a particularly big deal as a result. Oh, and I definitely can’t say that I would have avoided socializing entirely to spend all my time in the library, if possible!

Feeling a cold sweat run down my back, I lowered my eyes with as much forced melancholy as I could manage. “It cannot be helped; I made far too many blunders with Prince Hildebrand.”

“I told Sylvester not to scold you too harshly,” Florencia noted. “He wasn’t too hard on you, was he?”

Wow. I had been wondering why I was getting shouted at so less often this year, and now I had my answer—as it turned out, Florencia had scolded Sylvester when he was preparing to lecture me into the ground. “It will only stifle her growth if you ignore her accomplishments—raising our duchy’s grades, increasing our influence in the Royal Academy, and establishing bonds with greater duchies that we previously lacked—simply to home in on her mistakes,” she had said.

“Of course,” Florencia continued with a kind smile, “that is not to say that your socializing has no problems whatsoever. There is much for you to learn. However, that is a separate issue from your triumphs going unrecognized. We are all aware that you were raised in the

temple and therefore lack the common sense expected of nobles, so it is up to us to instruct you in these matters.”

In a shocking twist, I was informed that Florencia had come down hard on Ferdinand and said to him, “We may scold her if she fails to do what we have taught her, but for mistakes that stem from things we have overlooked, we must first scold ourselves for failing as teachers.”

“Compared to last year, there has been a noticeable improvement in your socializing skills,” Florencia said. “You are capable of working hard for our duchy’s sake, Rozemyne, so I am not particularly worried.”

Florencia is starting to seem like a saint—no, a holy mother!

She gave me the encouragement that my guardians hadn’t, moving me beyond words. I smiled at her, and she gave me a simply divine smile in return.

“Please make many friends in the Royal Academy,” Florencia went on. “Close friends are an invaluable treasure. Even during the Archduke Conference, diplomacy will change dramatically based on whether you have socialized with others there.”

“I-I will do my best,” I replied.

But, Florencia... that’s a very big ask!

I understood that she was telling me to make friends for my own sake after saving me from my guardians’ furious lectures, which made it all the more difficult for me to just read books instead.

Aah! Her hopes for me are too heavy of a burden! And that smile! No, no, no, no! I just want to reeread!

I took a sip of tea to hide my internal screaming.

Elvira, who had been listening to us quietly, set down her cup and sighed. It seemed that she was on the verge of complaining about something or another—a habit of hers that I had picked up on while having tea with her before my baptism.

The question is, will she be complaining about her husband or one of her sons?

“At least you are showing effort and care, Rozemyne. I only wish that much could be said about the brides of our family.”

Oh! The brides!

Elvira looked at Angelica, who was standing behind me as a guard knight. “Angelica thinks only of getting stronger, and Eckhart hardly seems to care about marriage either. During social occasions, they simply stand to the side and smile, making no attempt to interact with others at all. Do you believe they might fix themselves up a bit after marriage, dear?”

“Angelica will never change,” I said. “I cannot even imagine a time when she might proactively socialize or host any events. That is

why her parents advised against the marriage, is it not? I believe you should not expect so much from them.”

Elvira let out a defeated sigh in response. “I know, I know.”

Angelica, meanwhile, gave a beaming smile. “That’s Lady Rozemyne for you—she understands me so well. I don’t think I’ll be able to change that easily either.”

“Why do you only ever speak eagerly at times like this, Angelica?”

Angelica had so little interest in marriage that it was safe to say she didn’t care at all, and while Elvira had told Eckhart to search for a first wife, he had refused, saying that it would be bad for his reputation to look for another woman while already being engaged to Angelica. He had ultimately said that he would only start looking for a first wife about three years after his marriage.

Angelica’s wedding was planned for when she was around twenty years old—the age at which it became harder for women to marry. By saying that he intended to wait another three years after that, he presumably meant that he never planned to take a first wife.

“Eckhart has given his name to Lord Ferdinand, has he not?”

Elvira said. “He cannot become the knight commander as a result, nor can he inherit our house. I suppose I should just be glad that he is thinking of marrying at all, but... there is the matter of Aurelia too.” She shook her head. “The problem is not her ability to socialize, as she has proven she is more than capable, but rather getting her into social situations to begin with. I might have to give up on that entirely for now; there is not much that can be done about it, I suppose.”

“Erm, Mother... Did something happen to Aurelia?” I asked, concerned. Elvira and Florencia exchanged glances, giggled, and then lowered their voices.

“She has conceived,” Florencia said.

“Wha?”

“She is with child, Rozemyne,” Elvira reiterated. I widened my eyes, and they both nodded silently in confirmation.

“Is it a boy or a girl...?” I asked. “I will need to prepare books as gifts. Toys as well. There are so many things I can provide.”

“Do calm down. Her pregnancy was only recently discovered. We do not yet know whether the birth will come to full term.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Elvira explained that it was not easy to provide babies with a continuous stream of mana. Those who received too little were likely to be born with only a small amount of mana, but conversely, those who received too much at once were prone to being miscarried. The latter situation wasn’t good for the mother’s body either.

It was important not to give the baby too much mana prior to its birth, but at the same time, a newborn would receive extremely

different treatment based on its mana quantity. I was left speechless; I struggled to remember the last time I had felt this kind of culture shock.

Nobles sure don't have it easy...

"Children are never made public before their baptisms, so do keep this to yourself," Elvira said. I nodded cautiously; she was effectively saying it was impossible to know what might happen to the baby depending on its mana quantity.

"Putting aside whether the baby is born, Aurelia does not seem fond of socializing, so Elvira must pin her hopes on Leonore," Florencia said, shifting the topic of conversation away from Aurelia. "Leonore is an Ehrenfest archnoble of the same faction, so she will most likely be trained to handle faction politics as Elvira's successor."

"Hm? Leonore?" I blinked, unsure why she was being brought up now, of all times.

"She is Cornelius's partner, no? I am told they are keeping their relationship a secret so as to avoid hindering their work, but did you not notice nonetheless?"

"Not at all..." I replied. I had sensed that Leonore was crushing on him, but not that she had actually taken her shot and scored. Neither of them had shown any indication of anything happening between them. "Now that I think about it, I seem to recall them doing more guard duty together as of late... Wait, am I the only one who didn't know about this? Mother, do you know what brought them together?"

"I do not know the details myself. No matter how much I ask, he simply replies that he refuses to be turned into a book like Lamprecht."

I could understand how Cornelius felt, but surely he understood that he was only delaying the inevitable.

"Do Leonore's relatives know?" I asked. "We will need to speak to them, will we not?"

"They have known from the moment she began preparing clothes to attend Cornelius's graduation ceremony. I have spoken to her mother about this often. Cornelius visited them briefly as well."

Surprisingly enough, it seemed that Cornelius had already laid all of the proper groundwork. There had apparently been plenty of time for him to do this, what with how often I was in the temple.

"I was aware that he was trying to keep it a secret from you, Rozemyne, but I see he was quite thorough indeed," Florencia said with a giggle. "I would expect nothing less from Elvira's son."

It was through Eckhart that Elvira had found out about Ferdinand's days in the Royal Academy. Cornelius, knowing this, had been more on guard against me than anyone, since I was in a position to learn all sorts of things about him and was highly susceptible to

Elvira's influence.

"According to Cornelius's letter, he plans to formally greet Leonore's parents once she has finished her classes and while you are busy with the Dedication Ritual," Elvira said. "I intend to use that opportunity to wring as much information from him as possible—although I do not expect it to be easy, considering how much his guard is up."

"I can understand why he would be cautious with me, given the position I'm in, but did he really have to be so thorough?" I asked. "This seems downright excessive. Is there something more to it?"

"He said that if you learned about him choosing Leonore, you would always assign them together at work, ensure that they sit together at meals, and generally make it so obvious that everyone would tease him to death."

I averted my eyes; that was absolutely the case. It seemed that he wanted to keep their relationship hidden until just before graduation, since there would be fewer embarrassing situations for him to endure once he was out of the Academy.

"He is less worried about his own discomfort, since he is soon to graduate," Florencia explained. "Rather, he is worried about Leonore, who is going to be in the Royal Academy for another year. Do be considerate toward them, Rozemyne."

"I will take great care," I replied with a nod.

Florencia's gaze turned to Elvira. "And you as well, Elvira," she said. "I know that your romantic *Royal Academy Love Stories* is quite popular, but if you do not wait until they have both graduated, will you not be making things miserable for Leonore, trapping her in the dormitory with no escape?" Her indigo eyes softened into a smile. "I am sure that Leonore will speak of these flowery days herself during a tea party in the future."

"I suppose. I have already collected quite a few romance stories, so there is no need to hurry. I shall exercise patience and wait," Elvira said, but her dark eyes were burning with a passion that made it clear she would wrench every last secret from Cornelius and Leonore the moment they showed even the slightest weakness.

"That reminds me," I said. "Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger expressed high praise for our romance-heavy knight stories. I allowed her to borrow a copy of *Royal Academy Love Stories* during a tea party we had and told her apprentice scholars that I am willing to buy Dunkelfelger romance stories from them. We may be getting new material very soon."

"Splendid work, Rozemyne," Elvira said, her eyes sparkling. As expected, the Royal Academy was indeed the best place to gather stories from other duchies, and the more stories from different school

years that one acquired, the harder it was to tell which were based on whom. Greater anonymity would inspire even more people to share stories—or so Elvira said at the height of a very passionate speech.

“*Royal Academy Love Stories* sells more than any other book printed in Haldenzel,” Elvira explained. “Thus, my book writing is all for the sake of my birthplace.”

It seemed that Haldenzel had more or less become a printing industry focused entirely on romance novels. I understood that they needed the sales because of how harsh the cold was on their land, but I was still impressed that Giebe Haldenzel had given his permission for such a thing, considering how stern he looked.

“Oh, that reminds me—the Haldenzel Miracle is quite the popular topic this winter,” Florencia noted. She was regarding me with a meaningful smile as she spoke, but I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

“What is this Haldenzel Miracle?” I asked.

“You reviving their ancient ceremonies,” she replied.

During their last Spring Prayer, I had seen the men singing and pointed out that, in the bible, it was the goddesses who sung. Giebe Haldenzel had taken my advice and gotten the women to sing instead, and as a result, Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder had worked hard to melt all of the province’s snow overnight. The weather had turned to that which would normally be considered the beginning of summer in Haldenzel, and this event had subsequently come to be known as “the Haldenzel Miracle” to the socializing nobles.

“You say that I revived ancient ceremonies, but I don’t deserve that much credit. Was it not Giebe Haldenzel who decided to follow the bible’s customs, and the province’s women who performed and provided their mana?”

“It certainly was, but, well...”

Elvira smiled and told me how things had progressed in Haldenzel this year. Farmwork had apparently begun earlier than usual thanks to the snow melting overnight, and their harvest had practically doubled as a result.

Of course, Verdrenna’s blessing had not extended beyond Haldenzel—as I had seen for myself when returning home by highbeast. The neighboring provinces had all experienced regular weather, which had resulted in Giebe Haldenzel receiving a lot of questions from the other giebes. He had made no mention of his own involvement in the incident and simply responded that it was a miracle brought about by the Saint of Ehrenfest.

Don’t put it like that! You’re not Hartmut!

“And so, various giebes are flooding us with requests to meet with you and with questions about ancient ceremonies,” Elvira concluded.

“What will you do, Rozemyne?”

“Tell them to speak with Giebe Haldenzel. There aren’t any more answers for me to give,” I replied, rejecting any meetings.

Florencia, who had not seen the ceremony in Haldenzel, looked at me curiously. “Did you not advise him on what to do?” she asked.

“I simply pointed out that the roles of men and women had switched over the countless years,” I said. “It was the people of Haldenzel who had preserved the ancient lyrics not saved anywhere else and continued the ceremony itself. I had noticed that their lyrics matched the poems in the bible, but reading the bible alone had not been enough for me to realize it was being used as a song in a ceremony. Although I performed with the others at the giebes’ request, I was clueless as to where and when everyone was supposed to stand. In fact, I was the only one who stayed prone on the ceremonial stage.”

All in all, it was really hard to credit me for this miracle.

“Not to mention,” I continued, “having me meet with the other giebes would only end in them asking me to visit for their next Spring Prayer, no?”

“That would certainly be their primary objective. All giebes and their people pray for spring to arrive as soon as possible,” Elvira said. She had grown up in Haldenzel, the province with the longest winter in Ehrenfest, and she explained just how much the northern provinces yearned for the melting of the snow. It was entirely understandable—even in the Noble’s Quarter, Ehrenfest winters were significantly longer than they were in Japan.

“However, I cannot attend every province’s Spring Prayer ceremony,” I said. “I visited Haldenzel this year because I needed to bring the Gutenbergs, but I have no plans to visit anywhere next spring.”

Blue priests needed to visit provinces too. It was impossible for me to travel to them all myself, considering my lack of time and stamina.

“A part of me does want to go to Haldenzel, as I expect to be able to read warm, freshly printed books amid the chilly air...” I mused aloud. “However, traveling there and there alone each year could easily be interpreted as favoritism, which would cause problems moving forward, no?”

“It certainly would,” Florencia replied. “Your visits to Haldenzel must be kept to a minimum. That said... I see that your desire to visit is not for Spring Prayer, but instead to read.” She gave a refined giggle, but what else would motivate me to go somewhere?

“I would like for all meetings requested due to the Haldenzel Miracle to be refused,” I said. “If the giebes of other provinces wish to know about the ceremony and stage, they will receive more detailed

answers from Giebe Haldenzel.”

Elvira nodded. “I understand your position, Rozemyne. I will direct giebess wishing to know about the ceremony to my brother. And speaking of which—here. A gift from Haldenzel. It is a collection of new romance stories written by my friend and me.”

I received the newly printed book from Elvira, looked it over, and then said what came to mind. “Mother, please urge Giebe Haldenzel to begin printing the lyrics for the ritual and selling them to other giebess. You have the necessary printing presses, and this way, the lyrics can be preserved in other provinces as well.”

Elvira widened her eyes, then nodded with a laugh. “It is much like you to suggest selling them, rather than simply distributing them for the purpose of preservation.”

“It is valuable information that Haldenzel carefully retained for many years, no? I think their efforts deserve a suitable price.”

After the tea party, I swiftly read the new book in my room. One of the love stories was a sad one about a laynoble who fell in love with the daughter of a giebe and worked desperately to increase his mana quantity for her, only for their romance to ultimately fall through.

Yeeeah, this is about Damuel..

Some creative liberties had obviously been taken—their names were changed, Brigitte was turned into the daughter of a giebe rather than his little sister, and it was ultimately the fact that Damuel had given his name that ended their relationship, rather than the fact he was serving a member of the archducal family. At its very core, though, the story was the same.

During the climax, when Damuel was made to choose between his beloved and the lord to whom he had given his name, a storm from the gods threw the scene into disarray, reflecting the depth of his pain. A goddess then descended to intone poetry and sweep her wide sleeves, bringing forth rain that withered the flowers it fell upon. Given the context, I could tell that it was symbolic of the agony of a broken heart, but I couldn’t quite grasp the intensity it was trying to convey.

But I could follow the plot this time, at least..

Sylvester's Order

Life in the castle was monotonous. I would start my mornings in the winter playroom, where I would read, write new stories, and practice the harspiel. Then, I would go to the knights' training grounds for some light exercise and radio calisthenics. Of course, my education was too high and my stamina levels too low for the other children to join me, so I ended up having to do it all on my own. Rihyarda had said it was important for me to remain in the playroom nonetheless, but I didn't really see why—it felt like nothing would change if I just stayed in my room.

“Am I not a bother to everyone else in the playroom?” I asked. “I stick out quite a bit, I feel.”

“Of course not,” Rihyarda replied. “The winter playroom was established specifically so that the archducal family could search for retainers. You have spent no time with the younger children due to your long sleep, milady. It is important that you socialize with them and come to learn their thoughts and personalities.”

It seemed that she was correct—one needed opportunities to determine whether someone was suitable before taking them as a retainer. Otherwise, more Traugott incidents were prone to happen.

“I feel that I have enough retainers already, though.”

“My, my, milady—what are you saying? Cornelius and Hartmut are due to graduate this year, then Leonore and Lieseleta the next. Your retainers in higher grades are going to leave the Royal Academy one after another, and if you do not replace them with younger students, you will not be able to function properly. You will need to pick at least two attendants, three guard knights, and one scholar from years below your own.”

That won't be easy, though...

There were a surprising number of constraints here, like trying not to pick kids who were better suited as retainers to future giebess, or kids from other factions like Nikolaus. Personally knowing someone didn't mean you could take them into your service. On top of that, I couldn't select any kids who had already been chosen to serve Wilfried, Charlotte, or Melchior.

Is there anything I can do to make this easier...?

In the afternoon, I went to the archduke's office and sat at the desk for Wilfried, where I read reports from the Royal Academy, sent

replies when necessary, and assisted Sylvester with his work. It was my first time helping him, and it was actually a little bit fun.

Ferdinand had given me the impression that Sylvester abandoned his work at every opportunity, but it seemed that he was actually somewhat reliable now. His pride as a father had apparently kept him from running away once Wilfried came to work alongside him, and at this point, he had so much extra to do that he could no longer afford to ignore it.

“Being the archduke is not easy, I see,” I observed.

“You’re the reason I have so much work to do in the first place,” Sylvester replied, glaring at me despite my intention having been to praise him.

“Wilfried and Charlotte are both working hard, so it’s only natural that you do as well. The scholars will appreciate this too, no doubt.”

In truth, part of the reason I was here was to keep an eye on Sylvester; Ferdinand had said that he was less likely to neglect his duties when I was around. Incidentally, now that Ferdinand no longer needed to read my headache-inducing reports each and every day, he was dedicating himself to gathering intelligence through socializing.

“Hey, Rozemyne. Hartmut’s report for today contains something I think you’ll enjoy,” Sylvester said with a grin while handing over a reasonably thick stack of papers that he had just been reading. I read them myself and then let out a cry of excitement.

“That’s my Hartmut! He’s so skilled. I can’t believe he got love stories from Dunkelfelger this quickly. He’s even sent them right to me!”

One of the apprentice scholars who had accompanied Hannelore during our bookworm tea party had apparently been gathering Dunkelfelger romance stories. Hartmut had taken the time to send two with his report instead of waiting for me to return to the Royal Academy.

And the name of the Dunkelfelger romance author who worked so hard to get these stories for me is... Let’s see... Clarissa. Okay. I’ve memorized her name. I’ll talk to Mother about whether we can turn these into a book once I get back to my room. Right. Eheheh. Tralalala.

Desperately holding back the urge to start reading the love stories right away, I turned my attention to a report from Wilfried. He mentioned that he was busy competing with Ortwin of Drewanchel. As it turned out, he was having quite a peaceful time in the Royal Academy now that I was gone.

Not that I care which of them can make the cooler weapon.

I read Marianne’s report next, which informed me that the first-years had all finished their written lessons. It seemed they were struggling with their practical lessons, however. Charlotte was having

a hard time in her schtappe-morphing class, since everyone was expecting her to start some new trend or another. I decided to take the opportunity to inform her about maternal symbols and suggested that she spread them among the first-year girls.

“Rozemyne, let’s put our work aside for a bit,” Sylvester said at fifth bell, which marked our break time. Having this opportunity to speak with him was perhaps the most valuable part of this winter because, after careful consideration, I realized that one-on-one time was something we had pretty much never had. It was actually pretty fun talking to him while sipping tea and eating sweets.

“Rozemyne, how’s the playroom?” Sylvester asked, munching on some tarts filled with fallolds soaked in honey. I thought back to my time there that morning while drinking the tea that Rihyarda had prepared for me.

“Professor Moritz is keeping things running smoothly even without any archduke candidates there,” I said. “The children’s studies are progressing well.”

“Nice. That’s good to hear. How’re you doing at building up your stamina?”

“Not as well... I’m putting my all into it, though.”

Then again, Ferdinand did say that I’m not showing enough effort...

I smiled as cover and swiftly changed the subject. “Speaking of which, Rihyarda told me this morning to select my future retainers from the playroom.”

“Yeah. You’re going to need more,” Sylvester replied. “You pick people based on your own inscrutable standards, but just be careful with your choices. We don’t want to end up with another Traugott.”

It seemed that other people couldn’t work out my thought process for picking retainers, especially when I had chosen laynobles like Damuel and Philine and was letting Roderick give me his name despite him being from the former Veronica faction.

“That is easier said than done. We have so many archduke candidates of a similar age that there aren’t many options. Melchior will need retainers too, no? Have you not already decided on the candidates?”

I was aware that Melchior was being baptized this spring. He would move to the northern building afterward and take on retainers, so we were more or less battling to secure the best ones.

“Once I’ve taken to someone, I’m willing to pick them regardless of their status, but I know I’m not in a position to say that,” I continued. I might not have cared about such things, but others certainly did, and status was essential when it came to diplomacy with other duchies in the Royal Academy. I needed at least one archnoble attendant, scholar, and guard knight. “So, I had an idea. What if

Melchior and I were to share an archnoble retainer in the Royal Academy?”

Sylvester spat out his tea, and Rihyarda paused midway through serving to balk at me. “Milady, what in the world are you talking about?” she asked. “Sharing retainers?”

“Hm? I know that we cannot share attendants because we are not of the same gender, but Melchior’s apprentice guard knights and scholars won’t have any duties at the Royal Academy before he starts attending himself, no? Thus, I will take them into my service and train them in the process. Of course, they would only be serving me in the Royal Academy.”

“More crazy talk from you. It’s always crazy talk...” Sylvester grumbled, massaging his temples as one of his retainers wiped his mouth. It may have been an unusual suggestion, but in my opinion, it was very logical.

“I mean, there are only so many archnoble retainers in the Royal Academy, are there not? Melchior won’t be entering the Academy until my final year, so this would greatly benefit us both.”

“And what about that final year?” Rihyarda asked, exasperated. “All of your retainers will depart at once. Please do consider things a little more seriously.”

The last year certainly would introduce some complications, since I would need to return all of our shared retainers to Melchior, but I wasn’t overly concerned. “I don’t imagine we would encounter that many problems, since only the archnoble retainers would be leaving my service. I would still have my mednobles and laynobles,” I replied. Worst-case scenario, I could simply borrow archnoble retainers from Wilfried or Charlotte when I needed them.

Sylvester rejected my suggestion with a sigh. “If you were Charlotte, I might’ve gone along with this, but it won’t work with you, Rozemyne.”

“Why not?”

“In the future, Charlotte’s going to be married into another duchy, and since she’ll only be able to bring a few retainers with her, it wouldn’t be a big deal for her to share some scholars and guard knights with Melchior. But you? You’re going to marry Wilfried and stay in Ehrenfest forever. It’ll come back to bite you if you don’t raise retainers to support you now, while you still can.”

It seemed that one would get closer to—and therefore work better with—the retainers one went through the Royal Academy with, rather than the retainers one took on later.

“Well, I thought it was a good idea...”

“The idea itself sounds fine, but it’s not good for the future first wife of an archduke,” Sylvester said with a forced smile. I didn’t really

think much of my engagement to Wilfried, since it hadn't impacted my life at all, but it seemed that Sylvester already saw me as a soon-to-be first wife. It was kind of a strange thought.

Reports arrived from the Royal Academy on a daily basis. Hildebrand was no longer leaving his room, as students had found out about his visits to the library and promptly swarmed the place. Hannelore had apparently been seen stroking Schwartz and Weiss, causing other girls to try for themselves and receive quite a shock in the most literal sense. Raimund, meanwhile, had finished his new assignments from Ferdinand and wanted them to be reviewed.

"Rozemyne, this one's from Charlotte," Sylvester said as he handed me the report. "Drewanchel mentioned that royalty is looking to buy another hairpin from us. You can send the order to the Gilberta Company."

Charlotte had received an invitation to a tea party with Drewanchel, during which they were going to discuss the first prince, Sigiswald, wanting to give Adolphine a hairpin at her graduation ceremony. They had planned to hold this tea party with me, but my return to Ehrenfest had come too abruptly.

This was a tricky situation. Drewanchel was asking for a hairpin at the behest of Prince Sigiswald, so we couldn't refuse on the grounds of their duchy not being part of the trade agreement. We couldn't outright say that we didn't want Drewanchel researching our hairpins either.

"I have not received an order for a hairpin at a tea party before, so I would appreciate your advice, Sister. From Charlotte."

Charlotte had gone out of her way to send this report to me; as her older sister, I needed to put my all into my response.

"Attend the tea party with Brunhilde and ask Lady Adolphine her favorite flower and what kind of clothes she intends to wear at her graduation ceremony. Pay close attention to their color and design. My attendants know what is needed to order a hairpin that will suit an outfit, so you needn't worry about that. And fear not—I will speak with the Gilberta Company. From Rozemyne."

Brunhilde could write up a proper order form without issue. It was those of the Gilberta Company who would struggle the most.

"I will contact the Gilberta Company in advance, as it will take a few days for Charlotte to attend the tea party and for Brunhilde to send the order form," I said. "That will give the Gilberta Company time to check their thread stores and inform the craftswoman of the job."

"Alright," Sylvester replied. "It'll be hard to send word out in this blizzard, though. Feel free to use a magic letter if you don't need a

response.”

His scholars immediately began preparing a magic letter. After writing my message, it would turn into a white bird that would fly even to commoners. Of course, a commoner wouldn't be able to reply, since they lacked the necessary mana, but for nobles, one could include response paper that only needed a little bit of mana to be activated in a similar fashion.

Which reminds me—the letter that Lady Georgine sent to Bezewanst had some response paper with it.

I gratefully accepted the magic letter and wrote to the Gilberta Company, explaining that we would soon receive another order from royalty and that I would send the more detailed order form over to them in a few days. I also mentioned that I would need extra Library Committee armbands.

The royals are being extra pushy again this year. Sorry, Tuuli...

As I was internally lamenting my poor sister's situation, fifth bell rang. It was time for tea.

“I didn't think we would receive another order from royalty this year...” I said offhandedly.

“You're surprisingly bad at predicting the future. The second prince gave his to Klassenberg. It's not too hard to guess that the first prince would do the same for an archduke candidate from Drewanchel. You saw this coming at least a little bit, surely.”

I didn't. Sorry...

“We've entered a business agreement with the Sovereignty, so I wish they'd communicated this in the summer through their merchants,” Sylvester said, “but if they were looking to make contact with you in the process, making the order at the Royal Academy is a surefire way of getting two birds with one stone.”

“This is all too sudden for the craftspeople,” I complained with pursed lips. “If only we'd received the order sooner.”

Sylvester laughed. “You seem pretty worried about this, but they made a great hairpin last year, didn't they? What, do you not trust your own personnel anymore?”

“I do trust them. My personal hairpin craftswoman is the best there is.”

“Then there's nothing to worry about,” Sylvester said and then downed his cup of tea. Somehow, his words convinced me that everything really would be okay.

My Tuuli really is the best, so yeah... It'll be fine.

“By the way—I hear that you're refusing to meet any of the giebes,” Sylvester continued.

“That's right. I have nothing to say about the Haldenzel Miracle, and it is not up to me to decide which provinces I visit for Spring

Prayer. I cannot have Ferdinand accompany me to every single meeting.”

“I heard about it from Florencia.” He set down his cup and then cleared the room; it seemed that it was time for a secret conversation. The scholars and the attendants left without much commotion. “Karstedt, Angelica—you leave as well.”

This was my first time seeing Karstedt be sent out of a private talk like this. I watched him go with wide eyes, then set down my cup and straightened my back. “Has something happened in relation to Haldenzel...?”

“Yep,” Sylvester replied, “and a few giebés are really intent on securing a meeting about it.”

Um... He cleared the room for that?

As I tilted my head in confusion, Sylvester awkwardly cleared his throat. “The provinces that only need advice from Giebe Haldenzel to revive their old ceremonies are fine. Instead, the problems come from provinces that already smashed their ceremonial stages for one reason or another. They can’t fix them on their own, so they want to discuss the matter with you, the High Bishop.”

“I mean, I don’t have a clue how to fix them either. And what kind of idiot would destroy stages used for ceremonies in the first place?” I asked, grimacing a bit despite myself. I struggled to believe that anyone would do something so moronic in a world where you could pray to the gods and immediately receive their blessings. The giebés who broke them deserved whatever happened to them as a result.

Sylvester, seeing my naked anger, let out a sigh. “You’re right; it was stupid of them. But religious ceremonies weren’t seen as all that important before you became the High Bishop.”

It was a giebés’s job to create and protect large-scale magic tools for their province. Repairing stages wasn’t my burden, and I didn’t have time to waste on giebés who couldn’t even carry out their own duties. I was busy transcribing the Dunkelfelger book I was borrowing from Hannelore, I still needed to research Professor Solange’s documents, and I wanted to reread Elvira’s new book a few more times—I simply did not have the leeway for a bunch of meetings.

“Unfortunately, the bible does not explain how to create the stages, nor is it the job of the High Bishop to maintain them,” I said. “The giebés will need to research their own histories and figure out how to recreate the stages themselves.”

“Hm. So you don’t know anything about them either, huh?”

“Not even the smallest detail. Although the bible contains some pictures of ceremonies alongside the stories of the gods, there are no instructions for making the stages or their magic circles. If there were, I would have told someone, and Ferdinand would gleefully be

researching them as we speak. Do not expect so much from saints and the bible,” I said, waving my hand dismissively.

Sylvester nodded with a solemn expression. “Right. But you know, Rozemyne—these requests from the giebels are important, and while searching the bible for descriptions of the ceremonial stages may not be your job, this is an order from the aub himself.” He then leaned forward, his dark-green eyes gleaming, and added in a low voice: “At least, that’s the excuse I’ll give so that you can go back to the temple and secure some reading time.”

“Ooh!”

What a wondrous excuse.

“The past few days have made it more than clear enough that Ferdinand infected you with his work obsession. You need to relax a bit more while he’s distracted with socializing. I mean, we called you back from the Royal Academy so you could rest, yeah?” Sylvester grinned and then put on a serious face. “I hereby order you to pore over the bible at the temple. I pray from the bottom of my heart that you discover some information about the ceremony and its stages.”

“Your wish is my command, Aub Ehrenfest.”

Investigating the Bible

Just as instructed, I would stealthily return to the temple without Ferdinand noticing to reclaim my reading time. I talked with Sylvester to arrange a line of communication with the temple, such that he could send over the hairpin order form once it was ready, then went to gather my retainers so they could start preparing.

“Aub Ehrenfest has instructed that I search the bible for answers to the giebess’ questions about the Haldenzel Miracle,” I said solemnly. “From tomorrow morning onward, I am going to be in the temple for some time.”

A smile betrayed my true feelings as I picked up my book from Dunkelfelger, Solange’s documents, and so on. At Sylvester’s orders, I would soon get to indulge in a paradise of reading until the Dedication Ritual. His primary objective was for me to get some rest, so although I would investigate the bible a little bit, there was no obligation for me to actually find anything.

Yippee!

Damuel and Angelica needed to prepare as well, since they were going to be joining me for my duration in the temple. I had also sent word to Ella in the kitchen. Our plan was to depart tomorrow morning.

“This certainly is sudden...” Otilie remarked.

Rihyarda shook her head with exasperation. “Is milady’s departure for the temple not always sudden? We should be used to it by now.”

“I apologize for the rush,” I said. “My hope is to find answers before the next Spring Prayer, and there simply isn’t much time left. I will need to return to the Royal Academy after the Dedication Ritual, after all.”

That night, I ate dinner alone in my room, since the archducal couple had been invited to a dinner meeting elsewhere. It was strangely lonesome, since I would normally eat dinner with at least Wilfried while I was in the castle. In the end, I started to wish I could return to the Royal Academy—purely to have company during mealtime, if nothing else.

Come morning, my preparations for staying at the temple were complete, and we left while following Damuel and Angelica on their highbeasts. Traveling in the fearsome blizzard was as difficult as

usual, and if not for their dark-yellow capes, I would not have known where I was flying. It made me wonder how the knights could make it to the temple.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

My attendants greeted me when I arrived, all standing in the freezing cold.

“And so I have returned,” I replied, walking along the path that Damuel and Angelica made for me while taking care not to trip. This time, I managed to reach the temple without falling flat on my face.

My muscles might be coming back to me.

Although there were fewer stumbles to speak of, the walk to the temple still took me a lot longer than it would a normal person. My coat was covered with snow by the time I stepped inside, so Monika removed it from me and then brushed the remaining snow from my clothes.

As I watched the snow tumble to my feet, Zahm looked around as if searching for something. “Lady Rozemyne, is the High Priest not with you?” he asked.

“He is busy with socializing and will most likely remain in the Noble’s Quarter until the Dedication Ritual,” I replied. “I have returned to investigate the bible, at the aub’s orders.”

“You are to investigate the bible?” Fran repeated, blinking curiously.

“We made spring come early in Haldenzel through Spring Prayer, and the other giebels wish to perform the ceremony as well,” I said, explaining the Haldenzel Miracle. “I am going to be researching the bible carefully so it can be recreated. I already compared those in the book room during my blue shrine maiden days, but I must finish before the Dedication Ritual, so I do not have much time.”

“Time certainly is of the essence, then,” Fran said with a nod.

I entered the High Bishop’s chambers, changed into my High Bishop robes, and then listened to everyone’s reports while enjoying the tea Nicola had poured for me. According to Gil, we had been told to avoid visiting the Plantin Company for a bit, since they had gotten a new lehang. We needed to wait until Lutz came with a message.

“The Plantin Company does not want our information leaking to them,” Gil said.

“Just who is this lehang, anyway?” I mused. They had already allowed the guildmaster’s grandson Damian to get super involved, and I couldn’t imagine anyone we would want to be more on guard against than him.

“It seems to be the daughter of a Klassenberg merchant.”

Um, a Klassenberg merchant? What...? Why would you hire someone like that, Benno?!

“There were some kind of extreme circumstances,” Gil noted.
“Lutz said that he doesn’t know the details either.”

“I see. Hopefully everything ends up fine.”

I finished my tea while listening to the reports, then had Fran fetch the fancy, feystone-protected bible for me. He took it from its shrine and placed it carefully in front of me, with the key next to it. I could feel my mana being drained as I slid the key into the lock.

I opened the thick cover while humming to myself, resolved to skim the usual contents of the bible a single time before saying there was nothing more I could do. But instead, I saw something completely unlike what I remembered.

“What in the world...?” I muttered, my eyes wide.

“Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?” Fran asked without hesitation. His eyes were curiously flitting between the bible and me, at which point I remembered Ferdinand saying that the High Bishop’s bible was only able to be read by those who had received permission. In other words, Fran couldn’t see its contents at all. At the same time, I recalled that Ferdinand had taken care to ensure that only nobles learned about magecraft and gave a heavy sigh.

“Not at all, Fran,” I replied with a fake smile and then returned to examining the bible. A magic circle had appeared floating above the page when I opened it, but that wasn’t all—above the words written in ink that I had seen previously, there were different words written with mana. I felt a chill run down my spine at the sudden change.

Hold on just a minute. What’s going on here? Has anything major changed since my becoming the High Bishop?

The bible was a magic tool, so I desperately searched through my memories, trying to think of something that might have impacted it. I was now attending the Royal Academy and had acquired a schtappe to become a proper noble—that was probably the biggest change. I had gotten my schtappe, learned to better control my mana, and gained the ability to do a whole range of things.

No, that’s not it...

I started and shook my head; I was confident that I had read the bible since obtaining my schtappe. This magic circle hadn’t been there when I checked the bible with Ferdinand after the Spring Prayer ceremony in Haldenzel. He surely would have mentioned it otherwise.

“Did something happen, Lady Rozemyne? Is something wrong?” Angelica asked and rushed over. She had a sharp look in her eyes as she glanced between the bible and me, and the seriousness with which she had called out spurred Damuel to walk over with an equally curious expression.

“Angelica, can you see what’s written?” I asked.

She glared at the bible through narrowed eyes and then shook her

head without even averting her gaze. “I don’t see anything. The pages are all completely blank.”

“Is it not the case that only those with your permission as High Bishop can see the pages, Lady Rozemyne?” Damuel asked. “I recall Lord Ferdinand saying as much.”

I gave a curt nod in response; I was just confirming that they couldn’t actually see it. “In that case... I grant Angelica permission to read the bible,” I said. “Do you see anything now?”

“I see complicated words.”

It seemed that she could now see the words, but not the magic circle. With that confirmed, I then granted Damuel permission to read the bible.

“Do you see anything?” I asked.

“I see the sentence, ‘Here be words granted by the gods.’”

As it turned out, Damuel couldn’t see the magic circle either. I could guess, then, that seeing it had nothing to do with having a schtappe or being a noble. Still, I was far from working out why it had appeared all of a sudden.

“I revoke my permissions,” I said.

“What’s going on, Lady Rozemyne?” Angelica asked.

I gazed up at her. “I see now why you elected to abandon thinking after your graduation, Angelica,” I replied, trying to avoid giving an actual answer.

Right. Guess I’ll need to discuss this with Ferdinand...

Such was my mantra in times of doubt. But first, I needed to read some of the new words.

“Ye who wish to be Zent, read on”? Oh no, no, no. I don’t want to be king.

I replied to the book in my head while reading on. I didn’t intend to become the Zent—which is what they called the king here—but books existed to be read. This text was unknown to me, and *my* wish was to read unknown text.

I’ll skip the magic circle, though, since it’s too complex for me to understand. I can just ask Ferdinand about it later.

At most, I understood that the circle involved all of the elements at once. I turned to the next page, and more new words rose into the air. There was no magic circle this time. I read the text, which basically said that becoming the Zent would require me to pray endlessly to the gods.

Anyone who wished to be the Zent needed to raise their mana capacity as high as possible, which could be done by offering countless prayers to the gods. I didn’t really understand how that would work, but it was possible, apparently. Once your vessel stopped growing, and your mana stopped increasing, you would pray again,

and a path would open that led to the gods. They would then give you what was needed to wield the power of the Zent. Incidentally, if the path to the gods did not open, it meant you weren't qualified to be the Zent.

But what are those qualifications...?

Once you had the divine strength necessary to wield the power of the Zent, you had to pray to the gods once again. Then, with enough effort, the gods would grant you their wisdom. It was written that only those with both the required power *and* wisdom could finally be recognized as the Zent.

Somehow, it feels like you do nothing but pray.

These were probably hints for becoming king. I understood the general process, but since none of the details were written clearly, I didn't entirely follow. It wasn't as if anyone could become king, and perhaps it was written vaguely on purpose. Maybe this was all obvious to everyone back then, and these roundabout instructions would provide the extra knowledge needed to know what to do.

But, well, I'm not going to be king anyway, so I don't really care about these instructions.

As unclear as the floating letters were, I knew one thing for certain—they were completely unrelated to Haldenzel's ceremony.

"In any case, I'll focus on Sylvester's instructions," I said, ceasing to care as soon as I finished reading the text. None of it had anything to do with me. I thought that saving the magic circles would make sense, but I couldn't work on that while Fran and the others were around, and the very thought of taking this bible to my workshop made me groan.

Eh. I can just wait until Ferdinand comes back. I'll start looking into Haldenzel in the meantime.

And so, I flipped through the bible, searching for the part where the Goddess of Earth's subordinate gods prayed to the Goddess of Water, as per Haldenzel's ceremony. I found it almost instantly—I had read the relevant passages over and over again for confirmation—and then read it again. There were lyrics and the illustration, but still no details about how to make the stages.

Whoever wrote this probably didn't expect anyone to break their precious ceremonial stages in the first place.

Having finished reviewing the bible again, I decided to spend the afternoon reading the documents I had borrowed from Solange. It was my motto to prioritize reading things that had been lent to me so that I could return them promptly. I read the work reports of the libraries from generations ago with a pen in hand, ready to make notes about any magic tools that were previously used.

The reports were exceedingly fun to read, since they offered a glimpse into the average day of librarians from the past. First and foremost, they needed to ensure the library was ready to be opened before classes began at second-and-a-half bell. It was a morning ritual for the librarians to divide the magic tools among themselves and start filling them with mana. They started with the large-scale magic tools built into the library building itself, such as the light magic tool that indicated the time, the magic tools that cleaned the grounds, the magic tool that quieted loud voices in the reading room, and so on.

Next, the librarians unlocked the reading room, poured mana into Schwartz and Weiss, and then had the two shumils go around opening the doors and preparing to lend out books. That must have been very cute. The very thought brought a smile to my face.

As Schwartz and Weiss were preparing the first floor, the rest of the librarians continued servicing the magic tools, one by one. There were the bookshelves that prevented old documents from rotting away with time-stopping magic, and even a magic tool that stopped sunlight from damaging books. I definitely wanted those in the Rozemyne Library.

Hm... I wonder if the “gramps” Schwartz and Weiss mentioned is one of the magic tools those librarians used to pour mana into.

I thought back to the Grutrissheit-hugging Mestionora statue on the second floor of the reading room. Solange had mentioned before that not all of the magic tools were being resupplied due to the shortage of available librarians, and since Schwartz and Weiss had taken me to that statue in particular, it was easy to assume that this “gramps” was in reality the most valuable magic tool in the library.

It seems I’ve already been doing some proper librarian work.

Thinking about it that way put me in pretty high spirits. I kept reading on, all the while writing down the different magic tools that had once been used in the library.

Once the students began to arrive, things started to sound a lot more familiar. Returned books were put on their shelves, carrels were lent out, study guides brought in by students were looked over, professors sent out ordonnanzes asking for certain documents to be prepared... These reports painted a truly wonderful picture of everyday life in the library.

It’s so nice... I want a life like this too.

As Solange had said previously, having enough librarians meant they had more than enough time to do their jobs, so the reports had mentioned some librarians leaving the library to have information-exchanging tea parties with other professors or with students.

One new discovery was that the archnoble librarians only worked in the Royal Academy until the time of the Archduke Conference, at

which point they moved to work in the palace library instead. They moved between the two libraries depending on the season, but mednoble and laynoble scholars simply remained at their posts.

In other words, Professor Solange always works in the Royal Academy's library, while other librarians are always working in the palace library.

Given that no archnoble librarians were being sent to the work in the Royal Academy's library, I could imagine the mednoble librarians in the royal library were having a hard time themselves. It would be pretty rough for a few mednobles to keep up with all the magic tools written here.

By reading these documents, I also learned that the older generation was very different from our current one. Back then, students would get their Divine Wills right before graduation, and it was explained that the students would raise their newly acquired schtappes in celebration during their graduation ceremonies.

Yet, these days, even first-years have schtappes.

The reports also mentioned that adult royals had a duty to attend the Archduke Conference and described an instance of one visiting the library. Three archnoble librarians had apparently greeted them.

And now, we have Schwartz and Weiss welcoming Prince Hildebrand. That's much cuter.

My blissful fantasizing was suddenly interrupted as someone shook me by the shoulders. I looked up in shock and said, "Wh-What is it, Fran?"

Fran silently pointed at an ordonnanz that had landed on my desk. "Rozemyne, did I not ask you to keep an eye on Sylvester?" it said, relaying a message from Ferdinand that was cold enough to be described as absolute zero. Just hearing it made me inhale sharply. "Tell me—where have you gone? Are you with him now?"

It seemed that Sylvester had run away somewhere right after sending me back to the temple.

Sylvester, you colossal moron! I regret improving my opinion of you even slightly! Now I'm going to get an absolute earful from Ferdinand!

I could already picture it—Sylvester casually strolling back into his office just as Ferdinand finished venting his anger. He was a master of skipping work and evading consequences—two areas in which I was painfully lacking. I couldn't make his expert excuses or deftly sidestep anger as he did.

"Come to me at once," the message finished. It then repeated itself twice more before returning to the form of a yellow feystone.

"Lady Rozemyne, did you truly return here at the aub's orders?" Fran asked suspiciously.

I nodded repeatedly, trying to assure everyone that I was telling

the truth, but Sylvester had given his orders after clearing the room of everyone, including my guards. Nobody knew that he had told me to return to the temple, and if he played dumb, everyone would assume I was lying.

But I didn't do anything wrong!

One could argue that I had been too naive, accepting Sylvester's order for me to return to the temple without suspecting that he was just trying to escape my watchful eyes, but that still didn't mean I had done anything wrong. The fault was all with Sylvester.

I didn't do anything wrong, but Ferdinand is going to yell at me, send me back to the castle, and punish me by removing all of my reading time. What should I do? I need to get out of this somehow.

I gripped the ordonnanz feystone, desperately working my head while a cold sweat ran down my back, trying to think of anything I could say to avoid Ferdinand unleashing his wrath on me and making me return to the castle.

Oh, I know! I can show Ferdinand this magic circle! Then, he'll forget all about being mad at me!

I produced my schtappe and tapped the feystone, filling it with mana and turning it into an ivory bird. "On Sylvester's orders, I was told to investigate the bible," I said, speaking my message. "I discovered something of shocking importance and wish to discuss it with you as soon as possible, Ferdinand. Please come back soon!"

As I thought about more excuses to use, the ordonnanz returned from Ferdinand and told me to wait in my room, as he would be heading to the temple immediately. Fran and Zahm went to report this to his attendants and prepare tea in the kitchen. I watched them out of the corner of my eye while focusing on the ordonnanz's voice and trying to judge how angry Ferdinand was through his tone.

"Mm... It feels like surprise and urgency is overcoming his anger a little bit," I ventured. "He still seems more annoyed than anything, but it's hard to say. What do you think, Damuel?"

"Would it not be best to stop this vain struggle and accept his scolding?"

No! No, it would not be!

"I have done absolutely nothing wrong this time," I argued. "There is no reason for me to be scolded."

"Then you have no reason to avoid Lord Ferdinand," Damuel replied, shaking his head as though he didn't want to deal with this.

I pursed my lips. "I'm trying to avoid his scolding precisely because I've done nothing wrong."

"Then do your best, Lady Rozemyne," Angelica interjected, clenching her fists in a show of support. "I'm on your side."

"Okay. You're on my side, but can you actually do anything?" I

asked without thinking.

Angelica's brow trembled. "Unfortunately, I'm too dumb to counter a lecture from Lord Ferdinand," she said. "He's just too smart. I can bring out Stenluke and do my best to fight the losing battle, or I can sit next to you, and we can endure the lecture together. Which would you prefer, Lady Rozemyne?"

Neither!

As we were having our pointless conversation, a bell rang to signal a visitor. Fran and Zahm opened the door, through which Ferdinand entered. He was with Eckhart, Justus, and his temple attendants.

"I did nothing wrong this time, okay?!" I exclaimed.

"Save your excuses for later. Begin with a greeting, as is proper," he said, lecturing me about something entirely unrelated to the problem at hand, despite my best efforts to avoid earning his ire.

It doesn't make any sense... How did this happen?

We exchanged lengthy noble greetings, then I offered Ferdinand a seat. He let out a long sigh in response.

"Okay," I said. "Now that we have finished our greetings, I will repeat my—"

"Enough," Ferdinand replied. "I was a fool to trust you with monitoring him in the first place. You are single-minded and easy to deceive; all one must do is dangle a book in front of your eyes and you will carelessly leap upon it, thinking nothing of your circumstances or the consequences."

Eep. I think I just frittered away the last scraps of trust I didn't even know he still placed in me.

"Um, Ferdinand... I take it back. You can yell at me," I said, fearing from his thoroughly exasperated expression that he was on the verge of abandoning me forever.

"That would be a waste of time," he said, now looking very annoyed. "More importantly, what is this shocking revelation of which you speak? The problem with you is that I cannot predict its actual severity from your words alone."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused. In my eyes, he was always able to see three steps ahead, so it was strange to hear him say that he couldn't figure out my meaning.

"Some things that are shocking to you are trivial to others," he explained. "In other cases, they are so unbelievable that normal men cannot even fathom them. It is nigh impossible to predict which is applicable with you. So, what is it this time?"

"I can't give you an answer that you'd find useful; they are all shocking revelations to me..." I grumbled to Ferdinand and then opened the bible. Both he and Justus leaned forward in interest.

“Blank, it seems...” Justus commented.

“Can you see anything, Ferdinand?” I asked.

“No, as one would expect,” he replied. “You have not given me your permission as the High Bishop.”

“Milady,” Justus said, “give me your permission too, if you would.”

After confirming that Ferdinand couldn’t see anything either, I said, “I grant Ferdinand and Justus permission to read,” while watching his face carefully. An instant later, his brow twitched—although just a hair. For the most part, his expression remained unchanged, so I couldn’t say for *sure* whether he could see the magic circle.

“So this is the bible only the High Bishop can read, hm? What makes it different from other bibles?” Justus asked. He was eagerly flipping through the pages, but his response proved that he couldn’t see the magic circle or the text in the air.

“It is a more complete version—or, at the very least, it has more details than any of the transcriptions in the temple’s book room,” I replied. There were several transcriptions of the bible in the temple’s book room, but their page counts varied quite dramatically.

Ferdinand gazed at me and said, “Rozemyne,” in a voice completely without emotion. I turned with a start. His light-golden eyes were looking down at me without betraying even the slightest expression. He shut them tightly once, then picked up the bible. “We cannot speak of this to anyone. You understand, correct?” he asked with a quiet intensity that left no room for debate. And with that, I knew for sure.

He can see the text and magic circle too.

Ferdinand entered the hidden room of the High Bishop’s chambers without permitting any of our retainers to follow. They stayed behind, looking utterly confused as I followed after him.

After setting the bible on the large table for brewing and opening it, Ferdinand swiftly sat in a chair. I pulled a second chair over to the opposite side of the table and then climbed onto it.

“Rozemyne, what do you see?” he asked.

“The same thing as you, I think. There are words and a magic circle in the air.”

Ferdinand started massaging his brow. “These were not there when we read the bible before.”

“I am just as surprised as you are; I came here to read the bible at Sylvester’s orders and did not expect this magic circle to be there at all. Still, you can see it even though Angelica, Damuel, and Justus could not... For a moment, I was starting to believe that only I could see it as the High Bishop.”

After a pause, I stared up at Ferdinand; he had fallen silent, not even taking the time to respond.

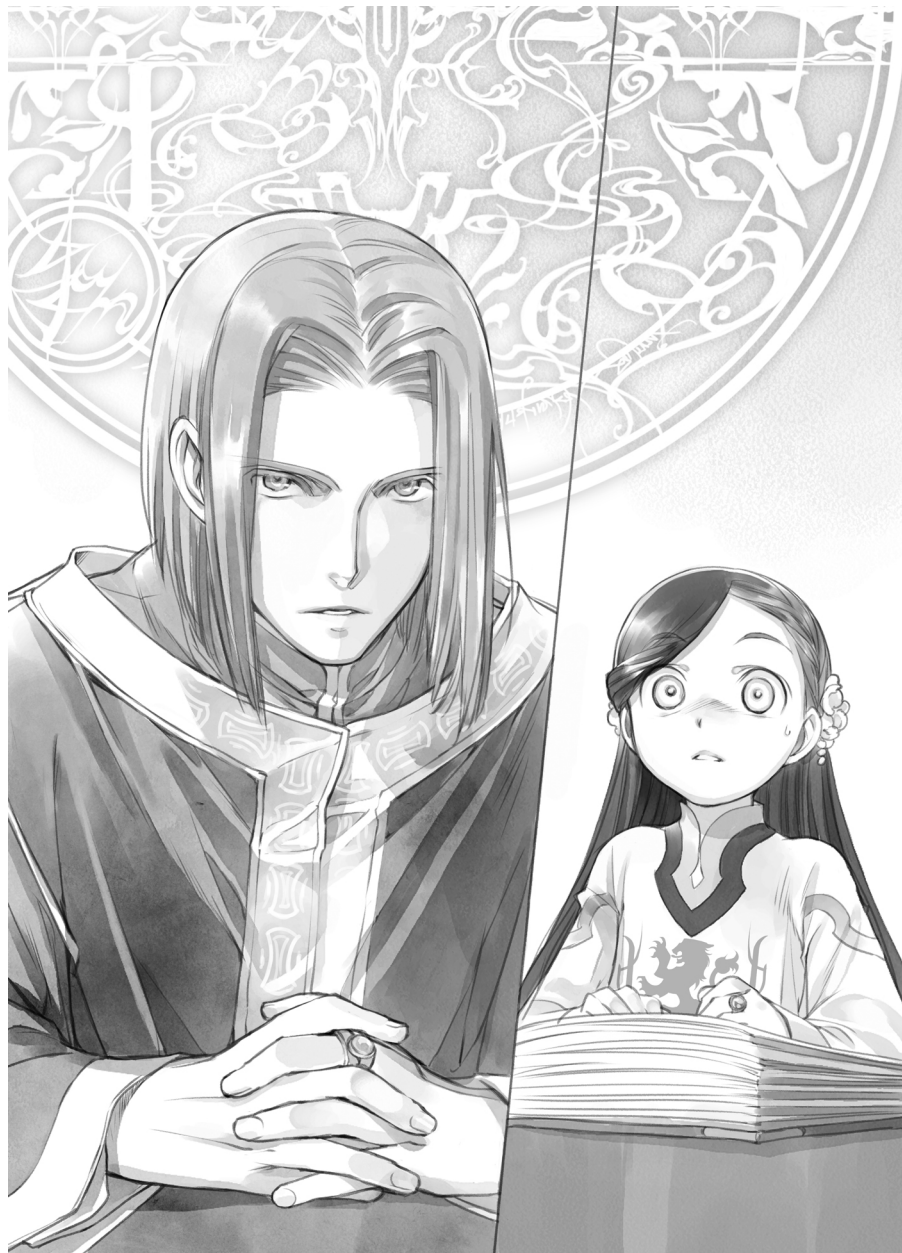
“Perhaps there is some condition, or...”

I trailed off awkwardly. Ferdinand was staring at me, still not saying a word, with a face that was completely devoid of emotion. His stony gaze was scarier than any he had given me before, such that I could feel goosebumps rise all across my skin.

“Um... Ferdinand...?”

“‘Ye who wish to be Zent.’ Do you wish to rule, Rozemyne?” Ferdinand asked, his voice colder than ice.

I swallowed hard. He was asking quietly, but I had no idea what he would do depending on my answer. Somehow, I got the feeling that I was standing on an exceedingly dangerous cliff edge.



“I don’t want to rule at all,” I eventually replied. “I only want to read.”

“Then forget what you saw today. This bible produced no floating magic circle, nor any words. This is an act you must maintain. Is that understood?”

His tone had softened ever so slightly after hearing my answer, but even so, he was unilaterally cutting the conversation short. The way he stood up and moved to shut the bible made it seem as though he no longer cared about the magic circle at all.

“I do not mind forgetting, but...” I trailed off again, confused as to why Ferdinand was so uninterested in the intricate, surely fantastical magic circle. I had mentioned it in the hope of diverting his anger, but it was doing a very poor job. “Do you not want to research this magic circle? It seems extremely complex, what with it using all elements at once, so I thought you would have leapt at the chance.”

“Rozemyne, there are many things in the world that one is better off not knowing. Do not stick your nose into these matters if you wish to live. Death can come swiftly from any direction.”

“...Death?”

Seeing that I couldn’t connect researching a magic circle to an untimely demise, Ferdinand gave a lengthy sigh and sat back down. “I will explain this only as you do not seem to know, but the current king has not fulfilled the qualifications to be the Zent.”

“What?”

“He does not meet the criteria written here.”

As the bible described, the position of Zent was given to those who transcribed the original Grutrissheit. Ferdinand explained that over the long years hence, this had morphed into the current Zent passing his transcribed version down to the next. The passed-down Grutrissheit itself had become the symbol of the Zent.

This transcription had then been lost during the civil war following the previous king’s death. Now, the current king needed to transcribe a new one from the original Grutrissheit... but its location remained unknown. It was possible that the royals had passed the knowledge down among themselves, but it was also very likely that this information, too, had ended up lost in the civil war.

“There are many things that one archduke passes on to the next,” Ferdinand explained. “I imagine that kings do the same. However, the current king was raised as a vassal up until the civil war. He was not trained to be king and was placed on the throne under extremely abrupt circumstances. It is very likely that he does not know these oral traditions.”

The current king had been put on the throne immediately after

winning the civil war, but the biblical fundamentalists in the Sovereign temple had apparently once rejected his rule due to the fact he lacked a Grutrissheit.

“They rejected him once, but due to the drastic shortage of royals and nobles, nearly half of all important magic tools could no longer function,” Ferdinand continued. “The country would not survive if nothing was done, so the Sovereign temple bitterly relented and accepted his rule. Peace is somehow being maintained under the reign of a king without a Grutrissheit. Now, imagine that you publicize the conditions for properly becoming king and reveal what is written in the bible. I suspect you can predict what will happen next.”

Doing such a thing would call the current king’s legitimacy into question and stir the biblical fundamentalists of the Sovereign temple into action. The king would no doubt want me killed before I caused any problems, and the mere thought of that violent end sent me shuddering.

“Ferdinand, does the bible showing me these things mean I fulfill the requirements for becoming king?” I asked. “Is that why you are so on guard?”

Ferdinand shook his head. “No, that is not the case. You have plentiful mana, all elemental affinities, and—on top of everything—pray to the gods often, as the bible describes. You certainly have all of the qualities necessary to become king. However, there is one crucial condition that you have not fulfilled.”

“And what condition is that?” I asked, looking at the bible curiously.

“It is simple,” Ferdinand said. “You were born a commoner and thus do not have royal blood. For that reason, you cannot become king.”

“Royal blood...? The bible doesn’t say anything about needing that.”

Ferdinand tapped a finger against his temple in contemplation and then let out a sigh. “In the same way that only certain people can enter this hidden room, the Grutrissheit is within an archive that only royalty can enter—or so an ancient text maintains. In other words, you will not be able to enter that archive, nor will you be able to transcribe the book. No matter how many kingly qualities you may have, you cannot become king.”

“Whaaat?! Are you talking about the forbidden archive there?!” I exclaimed. “I thought Prince Hildebrand would let me in now that we’re friends, but if that’s true, I won’t be able to go inside even if we do find it!”

This was one of the last things I had expected. All of my plans to find the archive during my time in the Royal Academy had suddenly

been torn to shreds.

Ferdinand gave me a suspicious look. “Did you not say a moment ago that you have no wish to become the Zent?”

“I don’t, but I *do* want to read new books! Isn’t it obvious that I’d want to read the Grutrissheit too?! Gahhh! Why don’t I have royal blood?!”

“Because you were born a commoner,” Ferdinand replied simply and shook his head. “However, allow me to say that I am grateful from the bottom of my heart that you do not carry royal blood within you. Besides, the Grutrissheit in the archive is the first king’s transcription, so we can assume it is nearly identical to this bible we have with us. Give up on this foolish endeavor of yours.”

Ferdinand wasn’t even close to taking the matter seriously enough; nothing could be worse than the absolute despair of there being a book-filled archive that I was unable to enter.

“Have a little more consideration, please!” I said. “I’m emotionally devastated.”

“I am the devastated one here, Rozemyne. My remaining hope that you might one day show a shred of normalcy has been completely dashed.”

It just got worse!

At this point, no matter how much I expressed my sorrow, I could only expect insults in return. I pressed my lips closed and glared at Ferdinand, but he glared back, as if challenging me to complain more. I averted my eyes—and silently wished that I could avert the subject too.

“Still, why *did* these words and the magic circle start coming out of the bible?” I asked.

“I imagine you fulfilled some qualification, although I do not know the specifics. I have never been the High Bishop, nor have I owned the bible. However... I feel that I now understand why these bibles exist,” Ferdinand said, brushing the book with his fingertips. “The words and magic circle guide one down the path to become the Zent. They must exist so that the correct Zent can be crowned.”

“I still don’t understand...”

“This is just a theory,” Ferdinand said, “but the first Zent was also a High Bishop who served the gods. I believe you studied this in history.”

“Yes. The king’s children then performed religious ceremonies in the temple, right? That’s why, even in other duchies, the position of High Bishop was given to the archduke’s children.”

This much was evident from Eglantine saying that the children of archdukes serving as High Bishops was the ancient way of the world, back in the day when every duchy followed the tradition. In the

temple, kings and archdukes were equivalent, so children of the king would similarly serve as High Bishops.

“Even if there were civil wars and conflicts that silenced oral tradition, as long as the children of kings continued to serve as High Bishops, the bible would reveal to them the path to the Gruttrissheit,” Ferdinand explained. “I am sure the first-generation king never imagined that the temple would lose its power and end up so hostile against the crown... nor that a commoner such as you would one day become High Bishop and possess the qualities necessary to become king.”

Put like that, I really started to sound abnormal. Well, maybe I was. Just a little bit.

“Furthermore, the archdukes in the distant past were married to those of royal blood,” Ferdinand continued. “In other words, one could say that more or less all children of archdukes have royal blood to some extent. Perhaps the first king distributed these bibles to each duchy such that the strongest of all those with his blood would be chosen to be king.”

Distributing bibles to each archduke was a highly effective approach, even just in terms of preserving information. The first-generation king might have been a surprisingly intelligent person indeed.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “this is truly ancient history, but I read that one of the past kings was from Dunkelfelger. It was in one of their history books. I was curious as to why he had come from another duchy, rather than being one of the king’s children, but this explains it.”

“Oho. Your history book from Dunkelfelger... You had your scholars transcribe it, correct? I wish to borrow it,” Ferdinand said, his eyes shining with curiosity.

“Certainly. We may exchange books.”

His brow twitched. “Have I not already lent you enough books?”

“I am a glutton for new books. I will not miss even the slightest opportunity to obtain new reading material.”

“Yes, I am well aware,” Ferdinand said with a chuckle. He agreed to exchange a new book for the Dunkelfelger history book, but no sooner had we made this agreement than his expression changed completely. He looked gravely serious again, so I closed my mouth and straightened my back. “Speak to nobody of what we have discussed and what we saw in the bible. None may hear of this under any circumstances. I will forget what I saw. You must do the same.”

He was going to pretend that he hadn’t seen anything either, apparently. I couldn’t help but wonder how many secrets Ferdinand was likewise pretending to have forgotten, and as that thought ran

through my mind, I gazed at the inkpot on my shelf—the inkpot I was forbidden from ever using.

“Nothing good will come from us involving ourselves in this. One wrong move and Ehrenfest will experience a purge like those that followed the civil wars.”

“Um, what...?” I reacted on instinct, surprised to hear something so violent.

Ferdinand stared at me with hard eyes. “You are an archduke candidate with knowledge about how to become the true king chosen by the gods with their divine mandate. In addition to this, you are a saint and a highly popular High Bishop. To those in power, you will appear to be a revolutionary on the verge of usurpation. War would follow in your wake at the smallest movement. Do you wish to start a war now, when the first prince has safely been selected as the crown prince?”

“No. I wish for books and nothing more,” I said flatly.

“Good, then.” Ferdinand stood up and walked over to me. I gazed up at him, curious, and after a moment’s hesitation, he gently patted my head. “Rozemyne... Read new books and forget all about the bible. This is for your sake.”

I realized this was his clumsy way of consoling me and smiled, hoping to lighten the mood at least a little. “You can count on me!” I declared. “Forgetting is my specialty. I mean, I was planning to read a lot before this report anyway. I called you over here saying this was an emergency, but really, I just didn’t want to get yelled at.”

In an instant, the hand that had been patting my head gripped it instead. An instinctive “Bwuh?” escaped me, and when I gazed up, I saw Ferdinand giving me a terrifying smile. His stone-faced expression had seemed scary enough, but this was something else entirely.

“Oho. For you to reveal that yourself, you must truly wish to be yelled at.”

“N-Not at all. That was just a joke. To, uh, ease tensions a little. To settle things down. That’s all.”

His fingers tightened their grip on my head. It hurt. Ouchies.

Ferdinand’s lips curved into a grin as he saw me get tragically teary-eyed. “And who would I be to deny you your wish?” he said. “Sit there.”

“E-Eep. Sorry! Sorry!”

Talk about a huge blunder...

After giving me a thorough lecture, Ferdinand returned to the castle to yell at Sylvester. And of course, in the end, I was the only one to receive a scolding. Sylvester returned several bells later and explained that he had gone to an archive locked to everyone but the

archduke to search for documents on the ceremonial stages. He had predicted that I would only serve as a tremendous annoyance, so he had deliberately gotten rid of me before I could find out what he was doing.

If only I'd known! Then, I never would have gone back to the temple. I'd have stuck to Sylvester like glue! Gahhhh!

Winter Life in the Temple

I was staying in the temple, having received an order from the archduke to investigate the bible, and now I was pouring my all into reading. At the moment, I was partway through the book that Hannelore had lent me. Fey creatures like feyplants and feybeasts were more common in Dunkelfelger than anywhere else, it seemed, so everyone there had to grow strong.

The book featured many different fey species and grand descriptions of the ways they were defeated, mixed in with poems extolling the gods. Rather than knight stories, it was like reading a hunting log with poems attached. The gods that appeared were exclusively Leidenschaft's subordinates, and the book's contents gave me the same testosterone-heavy locker-room vibe that emanated from Rauffen.

Dunkelfelger's love of ditter has never been clearer to me than at this moment.

I also read the love stories that Clarissa had given Hartmut. They were more or less common knowledge in Dunkelfelger, I was told, but unlike the deeply romantic knight stories that Elvira loved so much, these were primarily about women tasking burgeoning knights with hunts to prove their strength. They were more like *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* than anything.

The men of Dunkelfelger expressed their love by enduring the impossible demands and fighting until they defeated the feybeast, whereupon they brought its feystone back and offered it to the woman they loved. No matter how much plotting their women did, no matter how far through hell they had to trudge, the knights' love never faltered as they charged forward. One had to tear up at how wholesome it all was.

Good luck, Dunkelfelger men!

Ferdinand finished socializing and returned to the temple as I was reading the borrowed stories. It seemed that he planned to spend our time until the Dedication Ritual studying the magic circle Hartmut had drawn out. Preparations for the ritual were being left to Kampf and Frietack, so in essence, he now had some much-needed time off.

"I'm going to be really busy at the Royal Academy after the Dedication Ritual, Ferdinand—will you not also be able to rest then?" I suggested. "Everyone always seems to be talking about what a

gremlin I am, so you might as well make the most of your time not having to deal with me.”

“You fool,” he shot back, a particular coldness in his golden eyes. “Those days are the most stressful of all for me. I must read one report after another about the chaos you are creating out of my reach. How could I ever rest then?”

“Eep. I’m sorry...”

Letting me keep to myself and read all day, as I was doing now, sounded like the solution to everyone’s problems—but things were never that simple in the Royal Academy. Ferdinand turned to his own attendants, took some sheets of paper from them, and then handed them to me.

“Speaking of the Royal Academy,” he said, “we have received the order for the Gilberta Company, alongside a number of questions from Charlotte. They require a response from you.”

I started inspecting the order form; Brunhilde had written out every possible detail with great care. Picking the thread and the appropriate design was going to be much easier thanks to her efforts.

“I shall call for the Gilberta Company when the blizzard next eases,” I said. “I can use the opportunity to order my spring outfits as well.”

I wanted to see Tuuli again; it had been way too long. Not to mention, with neither Hartmut nor Philine here, I could probably soften the atmosphere of the meeting a bit.

My thoughts must have been clear on my face, as Ferdinand gave me a conflicted half-smile. “I have some inkling of your intentions here, but there is no time to do anything about it. Simply send the letter of invitation and the order form alongside it as soon as you are able.”

“Right.”

I gave the order form to Monika and asked if she would tell Gil—who was overseeing the winter handiwork in the orphanage—to contact the Gilberta Company. I watched her leave out of the corner of my eye and then picked up Charlotte’s report.

“Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger invited me to a tea party. It seems that she wishes to recommend Royal Academy Love Stories to her friends while we are there. It is your book, Sister, but may I allow others to borrow it? From Charlotte.”

Hannelore had really enjoyed *Royal Academy Love Stories* and wanted to recommend the book to her friends during a tea party. She would then hold a second tea party at a later date, during which they would discuss their thoughts. I could guess she had mentioned this to Charlotte so that we could make the necessary preparations.

Gaaah, I’m so jealous! I want to be at the Royal Academy, having tea

parties with Lady Hannelore!

“Rozemyne, she is simply asking whether she can lend out your book,” Ferdinand said. “Is there truly that much to think about?”

“Ngh... It’s just too cruel that the tea parties I want to attend most are being held while I’m not there. Way too cruel...”

“It was wise of them to schedule the tea parties in your absence—you would doubtless end up collapsing from excitement if you attended them. Did we not agree that it is Charlotte’s job to spread the books?” he asked, giving me an exasperated look.

I pursed my lips. I understood what he was saying—I couldn’t just attend and collapse at every tea party—but still... Was it really so wrong for me to want to attend a tea party where I might make more bookworm friends? Either way, I was a big fan of spreading books in the Royal Academy, so I wrote to Charlotte expressing my approval.

“You may lend them as you will, Charlotte. Please spread them all across the lands. Incidentally, I would suggest that you bring many apprentice scholars with you and collect love stories from the gathered attendees. I am looking forward to seeing what you end up with. From Rozemyne.”

Ferdinand would send my response to her via the castle.

Gil delivered the order form and arranged a meeting with the Gilberta Company for the next time the blizzard weakened. I would gaze out my window every morning to check the weather, excited to see Tuuli again. Until then, however, there were temple matters to attend to—I needed to arrange a lunch meeting with Ferdinand, who was locked away in his workshop again, since his and my attendants had come to me to express their concern.

Ferdinand allowed me into his room with a very unwelcoming smile that made me want to return to my own chambers at once. Really, if anyone here had cause to be frustrated, it was me—my time spent here was time not being spent with my books.

“Please show some restraint with your research,” I said firmly. “Your attendants are so troubled that they asked me to hold this lunch meeting. Not to mention, if you inspire Raimund to likewise abandon everything for his research, *everyone* will suffer.”

Ferdinand glared at me, his brows tightly knit. “I was informed that we are having this lunch because you have refused to even look away from your books since returning to the temple. *You* are the one who needs to be more considerate.”

Apparently, Ferdinand and I were equally problematic in the eyes of our attendants. We turned to them just in time to see Eckhart and Damuel clap their hands over their mouths, trying to suppress their

laughter.

“So, is Raimund completing his tasks at a good pace?” I asked. Our discussions over lunch normally focused on what Ferdinand was researching at that moment, since he barely responded to anything else.

“Indeed. He has potential. Some of his improvements have been really quite interesting...” Ferdinand replied. He tended to use his abundance of mana to brute force his way through magic circle-related obstacles, so he found these more efficient alternatives to be quite intriguing. Raimund must have been quite the genius to receive praise from Ferdinand, of all people.

“It doesn’t have to be right now,” I said, “but could you task Raimund with improving the mana efficiency of a small teleportation circle? Something like the magic circles that are used for taxes, except for books.”

“To what end?”

“I will distribute them to printing guilds, so they can send the books they produce to me.”

“There are still very few books in print. If you wish to receive copies, the guilds can send them alongside their taxes.”

“It may be true at the moment that only a few books are produced each year, but we should resolve the issue before the number of workshops increases dramatically.”

I needed to get the flow of goods sorted so that I could properly exploit the legal deposit system I had set up. At the moment, it applied only within Ehrenfest, and the giebels could simply bring copies of the few books they printed with them during winter socializing. As more books were printed and the industry spread to other duchies, however, things would only become more complicated. I needed my teleportation circles to be in use before then, so that my legal deposit system didn’t end up deprecating into a law that was entirely disregarded.

“Hmph.” Ferdinand gave a dismissive scoff upon hearing my impassioned explanation. “You make it sound as if your reasoning is grand and important, but in truth, you cannot wait until winter to receive new books from the provinces.”

That’s... entirely correct. He saw right through me.

“Working with Sylvester has taught me that ‘grand and important’ excuses are highly effective,” I replied with a smile.

Ferdinand pressed a finger between his eyebrows and gave a heavy sigh. “Good grief... Why must you learn only the wrong lessons from that man? In any case, who will supply the mana needed for the teleportation?”

“For now, I intend to entrust that duty to the scholars working in

the industry. In the long term, it could become a job for those with the Devouring or for gray priests who have mana, such as Konrad. I have always wished to create employment opportunities for the gray priests, so I am thinking that I might be able to use my position as orphanage director to provide them opportunities within the Plantin Company. I also want there to be a way for those with the Devouring and for the children of nobles without magic tools to survive. This will provide a reasonable excuse for taking children without magic tools to the orphanage, no?"

There were so few nobles now that even people without much mana seemed to hold some value, but I was told that we didn't want the number of nobles to increase like that. And if such people didn't have the means to survive, I just needed to provide jobs that would allow them to support themselves.

"...I will consult Sylvester," Ferdinand eventually replied.

"Please do."

And so, I started putting forward my new ideas, which Ferdinand corrected or outright rejected. This process continued every lunchtime for three days until, eventually, the blizzard subsided enough for the Gilberta Company to visit.

After lunch, I went to the orphanage director's chambers. The view outside the window was nothing but white; although the blizzard was calmer than usual, the snow never ceased to fall. Still, it was comfortably warm inside—the fires in the kitchen had been lit since morning as Ella and Nicola made sweets, and the furnace on the second floor was burning as well.

I sighed in relief and went up to the second floor, where I awaited the arrival of the Gilberta Company. They ended up coming fairly early, having most likely decided to travel while the snowfall was light. Otto, Corinna, Theo, Leon, and Tuuli were in attendance, and after we exchanged noble greetings, I gestured for them to sit. It was then that I noticed Leon and Tuuli asking Fran where they could set down a number of wooden boxes.

"Did the order form arrive safely?" I asked.

"Indeed," Otto replied. "And thanks to your early notice, Lady Rozemyne, we had enough time to prepare ourselves and were able to begin without issue. I never would have imagined that we would receive yet another order from royalty this year. Your craftswoman has already begun creating the hairpin."

Otto turned to look at Tuuli, who seemed a lot more grown up than the last time I had seen her. She nodded with a reserved smile; it seemed that my magic letter had proven useful.

"But unlike last year, I've also needed to order an armband. Is that

not too much?" I asked. My fear was that requesting the armband for Hildebrand alongside the hairpin Sigiswald wanted to give to Adolphine would end up being too strenuous.

Corinna smiled and then nodded at Tuuli, who immediately took a wooden box, set it on the table, and carefully opened it. It contained not just one, but *three* armbands.

"Why are there so many...?" I asked, looking up in surprise.

Tuuli beamed a proud smile. "These are spares. When you first said that you intend to give one to your friend in the Royal Academy, I considered the possibility that you might want more in the future and decided to make them in advance. How many would you like now?" she asked, her blue eyes carrying a glint that seemed to say, "Aren't I amazing?"

Tuuli, you ARE amazing!

As I trembled with awe, Corinna smiled and said, "Tuuli has quite the business foresight." In a shocking twist, Tuuli had also predicted there being more orders from royalty or top-ranking duchies this year, so she had been coming up with new hairpin designs since spring. Thanks to this preparation, she was able to start work on this year's hairpin without any fuss.

Tuuli gave a bright smile. "I predicted that you would have more big orders for us, Lady Rozemyne, and prepared accordingly."

My darling Tuuli is an angel. She's just so reliable!

Her expression practically screamed, "You can count on your big sister!" And with that proud smile, she fetched another wooden box. "Furthermore, this is the spring hairpin that I made for you, Lady Rozemyne. How is it?"

In a second shocking twist, she had even already made my spring hairpin for me. It evoked the image of delicate new leaves, as per my order.

"If you intend to wear clothing to suit this hairpin, might I suggest choosing from this selection of cloth?" Corinna said. "We have prepared three pieces similar to those made by the three craftspeople you ordered from previously."

At her signal, Leon took three pieces of cloth out from a wooden box and spread them across the table. The same craftspeople who had come out on top in my "Renaissance" competition had dyed new cloth based on the pieces I chose for my winter outfit, and to my dismay, they were all nearly identical. I didn't have a clue which one was Mom's.

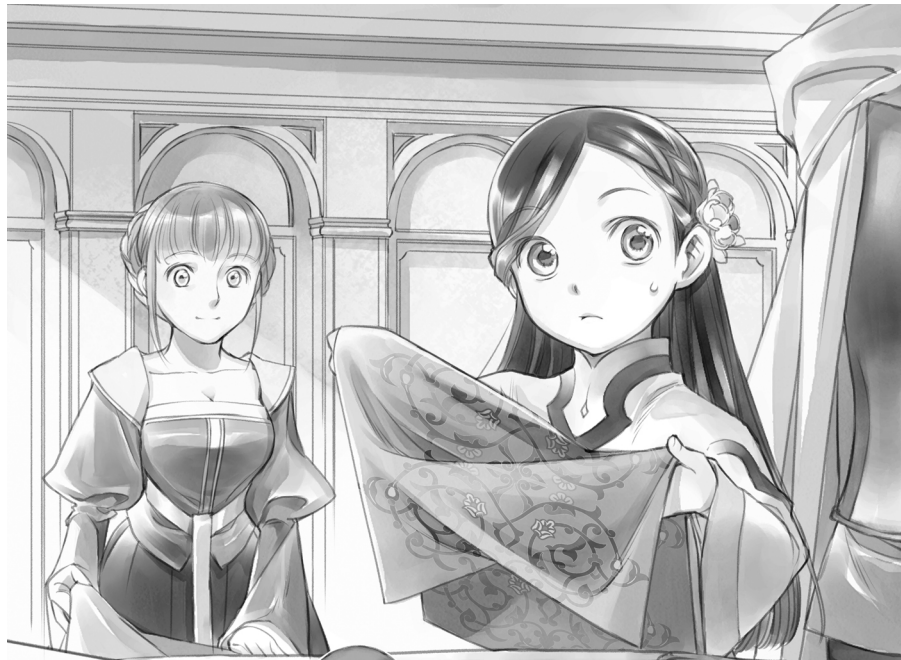
And to think I was planning to make her a Renaissance for sure...

I glanced over at Tuuli while debating the choice in my head and noticed that her eyes were locked in a particular direction. Perhaps she was staring at Mom's cloth. I followed her gaze and went to pick

the one I thought she was looking at.

...Nope!

No sooner had I picked up one of the pieces than her eyes began to fill with panic. I pretended to look it over carefully, set it back down, and then picked up the next piece. Again, Tuuli seemed to fret—this time, she looked gravely unwell.



But what about this one?

I picked up the third cloth, and in an instant, her eyes began to sparkle. As I started to examine it, I noticed that she was clenching her fists and leaning forward ever so slightly. This was it for sure.

“I want you to make my spring outfit with this cloth, and the craftsperson who dyed it shall become my first Renaissance,” I told Otto with a serious expression while Tuuli grinned from ear to ear. Otto agreed, though his wry smile indicated that he had cottoned on to what had just happened.

Now, Mom has my exclusive business too. Yippee!

After settling on a design with Tuuli and Corinna, I placed the order and then asked about the lower city. Given that my apprentice scholars weren’t present and I was getting fewer and fewer chances to see those from the Gilberta Company, this was the perfect opportunity to dig deep.

“Otto, I hear that the daughter of a Klassenberg merchant joined the Plantin Company as a lehangé,” I said. “I need to report this to Aub Ehrenfest, as it will impact trade and various other matters. Please do tell me of the details.”

“As you wish,” Otto replied. He grinned and glanced at Corinna, who let out a tiny giggle. “Her name is Karin. She is contracted with the Plantin Company for roughly one year.”

“Roughly one year, you say?”

Lehangé contracts were usually three years, so I couldn’t understand why this one was an exception. It seemed that the dates hadn’t even been decided yet, considering that he had said it was *roughly* one year. I could only blink in confusion, and that was when Otto dropped the bombshell.

“Yes. Because marriage is being discussed.”

Wait, marriage to whom? Huh? Benno?!

“There are many things you have invented in Ehrenfest that are being sold not just to nobles, but to commoners as well,” Otto began.

It seemed that the merchants from Klassenberg and the Sovereignty who had come during the summer had been shown many things by the guildmaster, who wanted to form as tight of a connection with them as possible. He had shown them the more stable carriages, the Italian restaurant, and the pumps by the wells while they were staying at the high-quality inns and the homes of major store owners.

“It was immediately obvious who made the pumps, since their name is carved into them,” Otto continued. “They asked about you and Zack, which led to them learning of the Saint of Ehrenfest, who gives true blessings and produces new products one after another, and

the work of the Gutenbergs, who were granted titles from the saint and work to realize her goals. At the same time, they learned of the Plantin Company, the store that you favor most and that you granted a name and independence to.”

In other words, they had found out about my connection to the Plantin Company almost instantly.

“Klassenberg sensed that a sizable business opportunity with Ehrenfest was in the cards, so their striving to form connections isn’t the slightest bit strange,” Otto said. “Of course, the simplest way to achieve that aim is through marriage.”

To the merchants of greater duchies, the owner of the store I favored most being a bachelor must have been a dream come true. One had even formally proposed a political marriage through the guildmaster.

“Benno refused, though,” Otto explained. “He was concerned about leaking information and never intended to marry in the first place.”

“Figures...” I replied.

And then, when the merchant had finished his business and returned to Klassenberg... he had apparently left his daughter Karin behind at the inn.

“What in the world?!” I exclaimed. “Talk about a heavy-handed approach!”

Karin had gone to the Gilberta Company to sell her clothes and accessories, saying that she did not wish to bother the Plantin Company and would chase her father down while using her own money to stay at cheap inns. Otto had spoken to Karin in person during this visit, trying to learn as much about Klassenberg as he could while looking over her clothes and accessories.

“After my time as a traveling merchant, I know just how hard it is for a young woman only a few years of age to travel alone. However, Karin gave a fearless smile at first. She said that while it would be expensive, she could ride a boat across the river and catch up with her father in Frenbelta before he arrived there. I was shocked. Her father had told me on his last visit that he was not using boats on the way back. And when I mentioned this to her...”

The blood had drained from Karin’s face, apparently. The route back she had expected to take—or perhaps the route she had initially been told about—was incorrect. She had no idea what route her father was going down and thus had no way to catch up to him. Otto subsequently determined that leaving her to fend for herself was too dangerous, so he had stopped her from fleeing the store and contacted Benno to have a discussion with the guildmaster.

“Benno showed more resistance to her leaving the city than

anyone, as his father had died outside the city on business,” Otto said. “The guildmaster pointed that out, which settled the issue almost at once.”

As a result, it was decided that Karin would stay in the Plantin Company and work as a lehang until next summer, when her father was due to return. Benno would take care not to leak any valuable information to her, and if things got bad, he would take responsibility and marry her, solving the problem by making her family.

“Benno is desperately trying to avoid leaking any valuable information, while Karin is with equal desperation striving to gather as much as she can, so that she might become Benno’s bride,” Otto concluded. “It really is quite amusing.”

“Karin *wants* to marry Benno...?” I asked. I had assumed that she was just going along with her father’s decision, and as I stared in surprise, Corinna gave a dreamy smile.

“Oh, something must have happened at the end of autumn,” she said. “The look in Karin’s eyes changed completely. My brother is doing his best to keep his distance, but somehow, I get the feeling they are going to be bound by the end of winter. Watching them squabble from the sideline, it feels as though they were made for each other.”

Benno was apparently continuing a defensive war against Karin, doing everything he could to prevent her from learning about the orphanage workshop and printing in general. I was a little concerned to hear about their adorable(?) squabbling.

“Will she not learn of these things naturally while working as a lehang?” I asked. “I trust Benno, but I feel uneasy when dealing with a Klassenberg merchant, of all people.”

Just doing this business deal with the greater duchies had sent Ehrenfest into a panic. I trusted Benno’s skill, but I wasn’t sure how long he would actually be able to last.

Otto’s expression suddenly turned serious. “Worst-case scenario, Benno said that he’d even eliminate Karin, if needed. That’s how much resolve he steeled when having her live with him. He wants you and the archduke to know this, Lady Rozemyne.”

Benno wouldn’t lie about something like that; he had been fully prepared to deal with everything when he first took Karin into the Plantin Company.

“Understood,” I said. “I will leave Karin to Benno.”

This and That in the Castle

Once I finished the Dedication Ritual, which Kampfer and Frietack had made the preparations for, my days spent reading in the temple were over. I was going to be returning to the castle with Ferdinand amid a raging blizzard that was steadily becoming even angrier. It wouldn't be too much longer before we identified this year's Lord of Winter.

"May I return to the Royal Academy as soon as we are back at the castle?" I pleaded. "I wish to have tea parties with Lady Hannelore—to talk about books with her."

Ferdinand responded with a look of exceptional displeasure. "I understand how you feel," he replied, "but I suspect that your fervor will prove too much for you no matter how many feystones we provide."

"But we just emptied a bunch during the Dedication Ritual. Seems to me like the timing here is perfect."

"Good grief... That is clearly not an option. Consider the hardships you would be imposing on others. And in either case, there is much that still needs to be discussed before you can return to the Royal Academy."

So he said, but I couldn't imagine what else there was to talk about, given how many lunch meetings we had shared at the temple.

I spoke about the ternisbefallen, he mumbled to himself about his research on the ingredients Hartmut had sent over... I mean, what else was there?

"Erm, what will we be discussing?" I asked.

Ferdinand fixed me with a stern glare. Apparently, we still needed to evaluate the power of my water gun, look over the information on Roderick that Justus had gathered, and discuss what Sylvester had found out about the Spring Prayer ceremonial stages—all things that needed to be done in the castle.

And so, I followed Ferdinand to the castle amid the raging blizzard. Norbert and Rihyarda opened the doors for us when we arrived. Cornelius and Leonore were there too, having returned after finishing their classes. It was strange—now that I saw them together after learning of their circumstances, it was hard *not* to see them as a couple. The two had no doubt gone to Leonore's home and formalized matters.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

“And so I have returned,” I said. “Cornelius—I see your mystery partner is Leonore. Was I the only one who didn’t know?”

“Not the only one, I’m sure,” Cornelius replied, but his expression said the absolute opposite. Leonore just smiled, remaining one step back.

“So, did you finish greeting her parents?” I asked. “Did they protest?”

“Everything has been dealt with,” he noted casually. His “yeah, I’m a real man” vibe kind of annoyed me for some reason. At first, I thought it might be because I was the only one being left out, but then I noticed Damuel’s smile twitch. That alone calmed the frustration storming inside of me.

Damuel must be annoyed that he’s struggling to find a partner while Cornelius, who’s younger than him, had no trouble finding someone almost his age with a similar amount of mana and status. I feel you, Damuel. I feel you.

“Now, then—a change of guards,” Norbert said, prompting the guards to switch places. Angelica and Damuel were going to have several days off after guarding me nonstop in the temple, and they would use this time in part to prepare for the Lord of Winter. Cornelius and Leonore would be entrusted with guarding me in the castle.

After seeing Angelica and Damuel off to the knight dormitory, I turned back to face Cornelius and Leonore. As soon as our eyes met, I noticed Cornelius tense up a little.

Come, now. You don’t need to be afraid. I won’t bully or tease you.

“May I hear of the Royal Academy?” I asked. “I looked over the questions sent to me while I was in the temple, but I know little else of what has been happening there.”

“Of course.”

On the way back to my room, I listened to Cornelius and Leonore give a report on the Royal Academy. Unlike last year, Ehrenfest had apparently hosted several tea parties of its own through Charlotte, and the shared copy of *Royal Academy Love Stories* had grown rather popular among female students of top-ranking duchies.

“I wish to return to the Royal Academy at once to speak with them,” I said.

“Please don’t,” Cornelius replied, stopping me with the same consternation I had seen from Ferdinand. “You will only collapse again. Consider how much that would make your retainers suffer.”

My belongings from the temple were brought to my room, and I spent my time reading while watching Rihyarda and Otilie unpack everything.

That evening, I ate dinner with Ferdinand and the archducal couple. The main topic of discussion was Melchior's baptism. It was due to be carried out alongside the spring feast, as he was born in the spring, and it ideally needed to be done before the nobles all returned to their provinces.

"So," I said, "this baptism's going to be similar to the winter one, except there won't be a performance wherein he plays the harspiel."

"Yup," Sylvester replied.

"That reminds me—did you find out anything about the stages?"

Sylvester had been fishing through the exclusive archduke archive in search of documents related to the Spring Prayer stages, since other giebels now wanted to fix theirs. He explained that he had found documents on the magic circle itself, but not on the stages.

"There're just so many documents," he said. "Too many for me to look through on my own. Things would be a lot easier if we knew the stage's formal name—or the period when they were initially made, at least. Problem is, all that information has been lost."

Sylvester was exhausted from several consecutive days of searching. There were so many documents on rituals and magic circles that he couldn't find the ones that actually mattered. This was my chance. I raised my hand high into the air.

"I'll help you, my dear adoptive father!"

"No. Only the aub can go into that archive," he said, shooting me down in an instant with a shake of his head. Life was cruel.

"But why?" I asked. "Are you saying I still can't enter, even though I only want to help?"

"Yep."

"So, you couldn't even have Florencia help you?"

"Nope."

An archive that can only be entered by the aub, not their partner or adopted daughter... Only the aub can enter... Only the aub...

"Rozemyne, I hope you are not thinking of becoming the next aub simply so that you may enter his archive," Ferdinand said pointedly. I recoiled at once; it was like he had read my mind.

"Whatever do you mean, Ferdinand? I would never... Ohohohohoho..." I tried to ease the tension with a laugh, but his eyes remained as sharp as ever.

Look, you don't need to stare at me like that. I already know I can't become the aub. I won't do anything that'll force you into killing me.

Ferdinand continued to glare at me for the rest of dinner. Once we had all eaten, Melchior came to say goodnight. I did the same and then moved to leave, but before I could escape, Ferdinand called out to me.

“Rozemyne, come to the training grounds of the Knight’s Order at third bell tomorrow,” he said. “I wish to observe the power of your new weapon.”

As instructed, I went to the knights’ training grounds at third bell. I started with some exercise, and Ferdinand arrived while I was building up my stamina. He was with Karstedt, a pumped-up Bonifatius, and Sylvester, who was always curious about new things. They all had their retainers with them, so the group was pretty sizable.

“Now, Rozemyne—show us your new weapon,” Bonifatius said.

“As you wish, Grandfather.” I took out my schtappe and chanted “*water gun*” to morph it.

“Never heard that chant before. Never seen a weapon like this either...” Sylvester remarked. He looked at Ferdinand to see what he thought.

Ferdinand nodded with his arms crossed, his eyes locked on my water gun. “The chant is unfamiliar to me as well,” he said. “As is the weapon. How do you use it?”

“My understanding is that there’s mana inside it,” I said, shaking the translucent water gun to show the liquid it contained. This must have made Ferdinand curious, as he brought his face closer with his brow furrowed. “It’s not something that can serve as a weapon unless you really focus on using it as one.”

“What do you mean?” Ferdinand asked.

“It was a toy, originally. It could squirt out water, but it wouldn’t do any damage.” I demonstratively fired the water gun, which caused a small stream of water to splash onto the ground and disappear. Ferdinand nodded in response.

Sylvester’s eyes sparkled at my demonstration. “Alright. Now use it as a weapon, Rozemyne,” he said, pointing at a target dummy. “I wanna see that side of it. You said it works like Ferdinand’s arrows, right?”

I nodded and then aimed at the dummy a short distance away. With my eyes closed, I visualized Ferdinand’s arrows... and pulled the trigger.

“Ooh!”

The liquid shot from my gun divided into several streams, took on the shape of arrows, and then noisily pierced the dummy.

“Amazing!” Karstedt and Bonifatius roared with approval.

Sylvester’s dark-green eyes widened. “That’s a lot different...” he muttered to himself.

All three of them looked surprised, but Ferdinand alone approached with a gravely serious expression, took my hand, and

examined the water gun closely. He had seemingly marked it as a subject to be researched.

“Hm. I see... This part moves to fire out the mana, then?” Ferdinand asked, twisting my wrist and forearm to get a better view of the water gun’s interior. He was so overcome with interest that he presumably didn’t even realize he was doing it.

Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!

“Ferdinand, could you not twist my arm like that?” I asked. “It really hurts.”

“Ah, my apologies. But more importantly—it seems that the amount of liquid within this weapon determines how much mana you can fire at once. If you were to make a larger version, could you not increase its power?”

He’s not listening! He’s not listening at all!

He completely ignored my aching arm and simply began muttering about ways to improve the weapon’s firepower and the amount of mana it would need to shoot out. I knew from my experience discussing his research with him at lunch that when he got like this, he blocked out his surroundings entirely. He would remain in his own little world until he came to a conclusion that he deemed satisfying.

Of course, I wasn’t willing to wait however long that would take, so—“*Rucken!*”—I swiftly unmorphed my water gun.

Ferdinand glanced up with a start, the subject of his research having suddenly vanished. “I was not done yet,” he said with a displeased glare.

I glared back at him with equal intensity. “Do listen to what people tell you. I said you were hurting my arm. Apologizing does not mean you can continue twisting it.”

Our staring contest continued, but only for a moment—my attention was drawn away from Ferdinand when Bonifatius suddenly roared, “*Wahtaaah grun!*” He had thought to try out the new weapon for himself, it seemed, but his schtappe didn’t change.

“Hrm? It didn’t work...” Bonifatius said, looking down at his schtappe in confusion.

“Your pronunciation wasn’t quite right,” I noted. “Repeat after me: (water gun).”

“Water grun?”

“Not exactly. (Water *gun*).”

The people in this world always seemed to struggle with Japanese words. As Bonifatius and I started to practice, Ferdinand crossed his arms and tapped his fingers rhythmically, muttering each syllable after me. Then, he produced his schtappe.

“*Water gun*,” Ferdinand said, and the transparent weapon

appeared in his hand. The cheap, playful-looking toy was so ill-suited to his expressionless face that I wanted to beat myself up for creating it in the first place. It was downright surreal, like the protagonist of a hard-boiled detective movie arming themselves with a squirt gun.

"I need only shoot it as I would an arrow, correct?" Ferdinand asked. He made no move to question the weapon's appearance and simply aimed at the training dummy with his cheap water gun. The mana that fired out was larger than mine, morphed into more arrows, and traveled incomparably faster. "Hm. This is quite a useful tool."

He had torn the dummy to shreds with a single attack.

Ferdinand gazed at the water gun in his hand and started to contemplate something. Perhaps he intended to use it as his primary weapon from now on. Since you could use it with one hand, it was perfect to wield while riding a highbeast. Judithe had given up on using it because it required so much mana, but Ferdinand with his abundance of mana wouldn't encounter that problem at all.

There was, however, one remaining issue—the gun looked painfully lame. I shook my head on instinct as I pictured Ferdinand making it his main weapon.

"Ferdinand, don't use the water gun," I said. "It doesn't suit you at all."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"It's uncool. I want you to use something heroic, not a children's toy. You look *way* more striking with a bow."

I wish I had the power to make a cool gun! Then, this wouldn't have happened...

Despite my obvious emotional torment, Ferdinand watched me with a look of sheer boredom. "You must value the usage and power of a weapon over its appearance, Rozemyne."

"Appearances are extremely important!" I shot back. "At the very least, you need to make it bigger like you said, or make it black so that you can't see inside. Just do something! I won't be able to stand it otherwise."

"I see. Rozemyne likes heroic things..." Bonifatius muttered and then asked me whether his weapon had my seal of approval.

At this point, Grandfather, I'll approve anything that isn't a water gun.

Once the demonstration of my water gun was complete, we moved to the archduke's office to discuss making a version that wouldn't look quite so jarring for Ferdinand to use. Sylvester agreed that coolness was important—apparently, he wanted to use one too.

We cleared the room, and I took a seat on the other side of the table from my guardians. I couldn't help but sigh, and that was when Ferdinand turned deeply serious. "Rozemyne, where did you learn of

water guns? You continually reference them as the toy of a child, but I have never heard of nor seen such a thing. I can only conclude that it cannot be found in Ehrenfest.”

“At first, I did it without much thought,” I explained. “I simply muttered ‘(water gun)’ in (Japanese)—my language rather than yours—and it happened. But the words ‘printer,’ ‘(copier),’ and ‘(scissors)’ didn’t do anything.”

“Copier? Scissors?” Ferdinand repeated. His enunciation was clear, but his expression suggested that he was still confused. Copiers were hard to explain, but scissors already existed in this world.

“Erm, (copiers) don’t exist here, but (scissors) are, um, scissors. Those are normal, no? But they didn’t work as a spell for some reason.”

“*Schere*,” Ferdinand said, causing his schtappe to morph into a pair of scissors. As it turned out, a spell for them already existed; maybe that was why speaking in Japanese hadn’t done anything. “For scissors, you chant ‘*schere*.’ If copiers do not exist here, perhaps your imagination is lacking? If you cannot envision the internal structure with perfect clarity, the schtappe will not be able to recreate it. Recall the way I carefully analyzed the internal structure of the water gun earlier.”

In short, it wouldn’t be easy for me to recreate copiers or printers with a schtappe.

Noooooo! It’s impossible for me to perfectly imagine every part of a copier. This sucks. It would have been so convenient!

My guardians ignored my disappointment about the limited utility of schtappes and focused their battle on changing how the water gun looked. Seeing that, I realized once again that Sylvester and Wilfried really were father and son.

In the end, Ferdinand settled on a water gun that was somewhat larger and pure black, making it similar in appearance to an actual gun. Unfortunately for me, I couldn’t shake the idea of water guns being transparent from my mind, so I was unable to change how my own one looked.

Now Ferdinand ended up hard-boiled instead of me. Hmph!

Life in the castle continued normally from that point onward. I continued to refuse meetings related to the Haldenzel Miracle while having Elvira, Henrik, and others attend as many meetings about the printing and paper industries as I could, striving to maximize the number of printing workshops.

It had become my morning ritual to look over the children’s playroom, where I searched for suitable candidates to become my retainers, and then go to the knights’ training grounds to do my

exercises. I sometimes made eye contact with Nikolaus, but he didn't come over and speak to me even once. I knew that Cornelius was on guard against him, so I didn't feel much inclined to approach him either.

We also discussed my taking Roderick's name. According to the intelligence that Justus had gathered, Roderick's relationship with his parents had completely deteriorated ever since the Ivory Tower incident had sullied his name.

"Milady," Justus said in a hushed voice, "please allow Roderick to separate from his parents, should he request it."

"But why...?" I asked, blinking in surprise.

"Lord Ferdinand forbade me from telling you the details, milady, as they would make you fly into an uncontrollable fury. You are always too soft on those you view as family and excessively harsh on those who threaten them. If you are still desperate to know, you may attempt to have your own scholars learn the truth. And after Roderick has given you his name, it would be simple to force him to tell you everything."

"...I would not want to do something like that," I said, my lips pursed. Justus chuckled and noted that he had expected me to say that.

"Milady, those of us who give our names are prepared to prioritize our lord or lady above ourselves and our parents," Justus explained. "It would be unbearable for our families to bring any suffering whatsoever to those we serve. If you wish to understand Roderick's feelings, I would suggest observing him from a distance."

"Understood. I thank you ever so much for telling me, Justus. This will guide me well."

After discussing matters with Sylvester, it was decided that Roderick would receive a room in the knight dormitory after giving me his name. I would have given him an attendant room in the northern building—like I had done with Philine—but he was a boy and was therefore barred from entering them. The castle had no dormitory for scholars, and since they already stayed at the knight dormitory when necessary, I was opting to continue that with Roderick.

The Lord of Winter appeared the day before I was scheduled to return to the Royal Academy, so I had to hole up in the northern building. Of course, I granted the Knight's Order the blessing of Angriff the God of War before hiding away. I was the only person in the northern building—retainers not included—so mealtimes were a bit lonely.

Ottilie looked worried while serving me, so I took the hint and

asked about Hartmut. "His partner, you say?" she replied with a troubled smile. "I'm afraid I haven't the faintest clue."

"Truly?" I asked. "But his graduation ceremony is this year. He needs someone to escort, does he not?"

"He did mention that he planned to court a girl of another duchy to assist with gathering intelligence. However... Ah. He listed the names of so many girls before leaving this year that I cannot say which he decided on. He said that he would make his decision while attending..."

"Hartmut is courting that many girls at once?!"

Please, Hartmut! Share at least one of them with Damuel!

Ottilie hurriedly shook her head. "No, no, Lady Rozemyne. Hartmut had not quite escalated to courting last year. His interest in such matters—in all matters, in fact—has generally been nonexistent. Now, he seems to be directing all his interest at you, Lady Rozemyne, so perhaps he has spread his romantic net wide and shallowly to gather information for your sake?"

Wait a second... Doesn't that mean the girls all think they're dating Hartmut, when in reality, he feels nothing for any of them? He's gonna be lucky to even reach his graduation!

"It troubles me that he resembles his father in that way," Ottilie said, "but I am not too worried. I am sure he will find a girl who needs him as much as he needs her. He will introduce me to whomever he decides on at the Interduchy Tournament, and I am quite looking forward to that," she added with a refined giggle.

I couldn't bring myself to grab this smiling mother by the shoulders and start yelling that we needed to intervene before the walls of the Royal Academy were painted red with her son's blood. It would be easier for me to rush there and deal with things myself, anyway. I needed to make sure that Hartmut survived the comeuppance he was sure to receive.

I focused on reading while praying that Hartmut hadn't already met an untimely demise, and the next thing I knew, the Lord of Winter had been slain. At last, clear skies were returning to Ehrenfest. I had enjoyed many a day immersed in my books and was already feeling reluctant about returning to the Royal Academy.

I put on my dark-yellow cape and brooch, then made my way to the teleportation room as Rihyarda hurried me along. Lessy moved lethargically to reflect my mood.

"Hurry up, Rozemyne. Cornelius and Leonore have already returned," Ferdinand said, standing imposingly before the teleportation room door.

"Can I truly not stay in the castle until the Interduchy

Tournament?" I asked. "I would much rather continue my reading for a little bit longer."

"Fool. Do you even hear what you are saying? You have much to do; the ternisbefallen inquiry and tea party with Drewanchel will not resolve themselves."

"There's no need for me to hurry—the Drewanchel tea party won't be until the Gilberta Company delivers the hairpin, right?"

I was returning to the Royal Academy earlier than usual this year, so the Gilberta Company would be delivering the hairpin to the castle, which would then be sent to me via teleporter. Thus, the tea party with Drewanchel was planned to be held when it arrived.

"Are you not the one who obsesses over visiting the Royal Academy's library?" Ferdinand asked.

"I am, but at this point in the year, I'll never manage to secure a carrel. Besides, are you not the one who said my return to the Academy would inconvenience all the students who haven't yet finished their classes?"

I couldn't go to the library, and my propensity to collapse meant I was forbidden from attending tea parties with Hannelore. In other words, there was absolutely nothing for me to look forward to at the Royal Academy. My time was much better spent in the castle, reading my books.

I don't want to deal with the ternisbefallen inquiry or the tea party with Drewanchel that will absolutely involve royalty in some way. I'll end up getting yelled at after both of them.

As I slumped my shoulders, Ferdinand picked me up and plopped me down onto the teleportation circle. He then looked down at me, his brows drawn together in a tight frown. "The prince will no longer be wandering about the Academy," he said. "You have enjoyed more than your fill of reading this year. Now, use this time to accumulate some much-needed socializing experience. Your shortcomings are already having an impact on your learning. Accept your fate."

"Fine..." I replied with an unenthused nod, having no choice but to concede. "Bye."

The Ternisbefallen Inquiry

Once the streaming black and gold lights had disappeared and the world stopped swirling around me, I was back at the Royal Academy. I reluctantly trudged off of the magic circle at the prompting of my knights.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” my retainers said, greeting me collectively.

I smiled at them all. Naturally, at this point, I couldn’t let it show on my face that I hadn’t wanted to come back at all. “And so I have returned,” I said. “Please report what has happened in my absence.”

Rihyarda and Lieseleta started putting away my luggage from the castle while I climbed into Lessy and made my way to the common room with my other retainers. I had them begin their reports along the way, with the book I was about to add to the dormitory bookcase resting safely on my lap.

“I attended Lady Charlotte’s tea parties with Lieseleta and taught Lord Wilfried’s attendants much about sweets and recommended topics of discussion,” Brunhilde said. “Other duchies are taking much interest in Ehrenfest trends.”

It seemed that just like last year, students of other duchies were expressing interest in Ehrenfest sweets and hairpins. On top of that, the Ehrenfest book that Hannelore had recommended was now a hot topic of conversation, and tea parties bloomed with stories of romance.

Aah, that sounds so nice... I wish I'd been there.

I couldn’t imagine a more appealing tea party than one full of girls raving about Ehrenfest books and exchanging stories about knights and romance. Unfortunately, that also made it several times more dangerous for me to attend. The risk was simply too great, and that fact made me sigh in disappointment.

Philine peered at me and smiled, a distinct sparkle in her grass-green eyes. “Lady Rozemyne, I attended Lady Charlotte’s tea party to gather love stories and was very successful,” she said. “In addition to that, many apprentice scholars from other duchies delivered stories they had transcribed themselves. You may wish to look over them yourself so that we can distribute payment.”

“Splendid, Philine.”

The idea of reading the stories accumulated from other duchies

caused my mood to do a complete one-eighty from melancholy to overwhelming excitement. After a moment of thought, I clapped my hands together.

Holing up in the castle isn't an option, so I'll just have to hole up here in the dormitory!

Since I was forbidden from visiting the library and attending tea parties where books might be discussed, this was the perfect opportunity for me to read alone in my room. There was an abundance of new stories here and no Ferdinand to constantly prod me with criticisms. Now that I thought about it, the dormitory was probably *better* than the castle.

No, no. I can't think like that. This is my job! I need to read the stories provided to us by scholars of other duchies and work out how much to pay for them. Then, I need to rewrite them into proper manuscripts to be published. Ah, I'm so busy! Ohoho!

My mounting excitement caused Lessy to speed up on our way back to the common room, and soon enough, we had arrived. I climbed out of my Pandabus and went inside, finding the students who had finished their classes passing time as they saw fit. Wilfried and Charlotte were waiting among them.

"You sure came back early this year, Rozemyne."

"Welcome back, Sister."

"And so I have returned," I said, now so inspired that I gave a genuine smile rather than a fake one. "Please, tell me what has happened in my absence."

Charlotte explained that she had attended several tea parties to fill the void my return to Ehrenfest had caused. She had finished her classes at a reasonable pace and introduced maternal symbols to the other girls, as I had recommended.

"Thanks to introductions from people like Lady Hannelore and Lady Adolphine, I was able to form a great number of connections with other duchies during the tea parties," Charlotte continued. "Lady Adolphine seemed very interested in the idea of sharing books when I mentioned it, but as I did not have anything on hand to give her, I promised that we would arrange something at a later date."

We were still forbidden from informing outsiders of printing technology, so at the moment, Charlotte was lending out the same book to one person after another.

"In that case," I said, "I just received a new book from Haldenzel. You may lend it to Drewanchel."

"A new book? Sister, we must read it first," Charlotte warned. "It would be improper for us to lend it out when we do not know its contents."

"Good point..." I replied with a nod and took out three books.

Two were freshly printed ones I had received through the legal deposit system, while the third I had been given through the good graces of Giebe Haldenzel. "I will leave two of these here in the common room so that Ehrenfest students may read them. The third one is my property, so I will decide whom it may be lent out to."

"I thank you ever so much, Sister. May I lend it to Lady Adolphine at a tea party two days from now, then?" It seemed that Adolphine had taken quite a shine to Charlotte—so much so that she had promptly invited her to another tea party.

I'm glad things are going well for her, but now I'm losing my opportunity to be an amazing big sister...

I had thought about striving to socialize for Charlotte's sake, despite having barely any talent for it, but it seemed that she didn't need my help in the first place. I smiled and nodded, feeling a bit sad about how fast my little sister was growing up.

"But of course," I replied. "Just remember to borrow a book from Drewanchel at the same time."

"A book from Drewanchel...?" Charlotte repeated, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Indeed. Books are remarkably expensive, so just as we borrowed a book from Dunkelfelger when lending one of our own, we must borrow one from Drewanchel as well. If we don't, will it not seem like we have a distrust for Dunkelfelger alone?" I asked, deftly crafting an excellent excuse to get books from other duchies.

Charlotte paled. "My apologies," she said. "I did not borrow any books from Gilessenmeyer."

Gilessenmeyer the Fourth was a middle duchy and the birthplace of the king's first wife—the mother of Sigiswald and Anastasius. It was one of the duchies that had shot up the rankings due to the civil war, and it had an archduke candidate the same age as Charlotte.

"Did Hartmut or Philine not advise you to borrow a book in turn when lending?" I asked, looking over at my retainers. I had informed them well in advance that they needed to guide Charlotte during her tea parties.

Charlotte shook her head in a hurry before my retainers could say anything. "Your retainers told me about your exchange with Dunkelfelger, Sister, but I had interpreted that as something special between you and Lady Hannelore, who similarly loves books. As you say, they are very expensive and cannot be taken out of the duchy so frivolously. For that reason, I never thought about exchanging books with all duchies."

I rested a hand on my cheek. A part of me wanted to suggest that Charlotte leave things as they were if pushing Gilessenmeyer for a book was going to prove too troublesome, but at the same time, I

didn't want everyone thinking they could take our books whenever they wanted without offering anything in return. Such an outcome would undervalue Ehrenfest books and negatively impact my plan to gather as many books as possible.

"Gilessenmeyer lending us their valuable books certainly won't be a trivial matter, but it wasn't for Dunkelfelger either," I said. "Please make it known during tea parties that our books may be given only as part of an exchange. Furthermore, do contact Gilessenmeyer and ensure they lend us a book in return. I do not mind if they need time to prepare one, but we cannot have them being the only duchy to have borrowed a book for free. My apologies, Charlotte—I should have made this clearer."

"Oh, no, Sister. It is all my fault for not having checked properly. I will contact Gilessenmeyer at once," Charlotte replied and then stood up to discuss the matter with her retainers.

I turned to Wilfried. "So, how have you spent your time? Have you finished your lessons?"

"Yep. All of them. I've done a lot of socializing too—although mostly with Ortwin."

It seemed that he had spoken to Klassenberg's archduke candidate quite regularly as well. Products from Ehrenfest had arrived there at the end of autumn. The women had rejoiced over the rinsham, while the song that Anastasius gave to Eglantine had spread through the public like wildfire.

"Oh, and that reminds me—he mentioned that Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine are going to be attending the Interduchy Tournament this year," Wilfried continued. "They wanted to know if you'll be there, so I said it'll depend on your health. Have you had any thoughts on going?"

"Sylvester hasn't told me I can't, but I don't know what my health is going to be like, so I can't guarantee anything. My guardians all seem very against the idea of me making further contact with royalty, so I might even be told to sit out again this year."

I didn't know what reasoning they would come up with, but it was more than possible they would announce my second year of nonattendance.

"Alright. In that case, I'll tell Father and Uncle that Klassenberg was asking about you," Wilfried said. "You do want to attend, right?"

"I do."

As my next order of business, I gave Raimund's new assignments to Hartmut and told him to tell Hirschur of my arrival while he delivered them. She would probably inform the Sovereignty so that they could arrange the date of the inquiry.

"Are you not taking a substantial risk by leaving things to

Professor Hirschur?" Hartmut asked. "There is a very legitimate chance she might forget or feel too apathetic to contact the other professors."

"If that will allow me to avoid the inquiry, then I welcome it," I replied. In truth, I was hoping the other professors were busy enough to have forgotten about me entirely.

"That would never happen, Lady Rozemyne—nobody could ever forget you," Hartmut said with a straight face. I tossed him some work to distract him so that I could finally look over the stacks of paper Philine had prepared for me.

"These are the ones I gathered," Philine explained, indicating a particular collection of papers. "These are from Hartmut, and these from Roderick."

"The three of you have done well," I said. "Now, I shall retire to my room and start checking over these stories. I wish to pay those who have gathered these for us before the last day of school."

I spent the next few days leaving my room for meals and meals alone. I read through the stories everyone had gathered for me, fixed them up into manuscripts, and then carried out any final checks. In between stories, I would read and transcribe the books and documents I was borrowing from Hannelore and Solange, which made my days quite productive indeed.

And then came the day that Brunhilde arrived with some unfortunate news. "You have an invitation to a tea party, Lady Rozemyne," she said.

"Please deliver it to Charlotte. I am forbidden from attending tea parties where books are likely to be a topic of discussion, as my retainers will suffer greatly during them."

"Hm? But you've returned during socializing season. Surely you must be allowed to attend tea parties," Brunhilde said, blinking in disbelief.

I gazed up from my book and smiled. "I was told to attend a tea party with Drewanchel once the hairpin arrives, but as *Royal Academy Love Stories* has become such a widespread topic of conversation, I cannot attend any others. I would not want to bother my dear retainers any further, as both Ferdinand and Cornelius have warned me. Instead, I intend to focus my efforts on making new books, to assist with the spreading of our duchy's trends."

Using my perfectly reasonable logic as an excuse to hole up in my room, I refused all invitations to tea parties and focused on my books. This continued for three days until, at last, Rihyarda's patience ran out. "For the sake of your health, you must go outside every now and again," she grumbled as I was trying to read one evening. "Let us go

on a walk tomorrow.”

“But where would we even go, Rihyarda?” I asked. “I’ve been forbidden from visiting the library as well.”

“One part of socializing is going on walks and greeting those you stumble upon, my dear.”

Whaaat...? But I finally have some time to myself. I don't wanna go on walks.

Taking care not to reveal my true feelings, I put on the best “sad girl” face I could muster, taking heavy inspiration from Angelica. “I was told to avoid any further encounters with royalty by whatever means necessary,” I said. “Staying here in the dormitory is the only safe option, I’m afraid.”

“This lifestyle is simply not healthy for you,” Rihyarda replied. “I suppose I must consult Lord Sylvester on the matter.”

I wanted to shout, “No, don’t do that!” but held my tongue—such an outburst would only compromise my somber facade. Instead, I asked that my permission to visit the library be restored and continued reading.

Good, good... Just stay like this.

Unfortunately, my lovely shut-in lifestyle did not continue for much longer after that. An ordonnanz arrived from Hirschur, informing us that a date for the inquiry had now been decided.

Three days from now, at third bell... Tch. How can I focus on reading like this?

A letter from my guardians arrived the same day, clarifying that they did want me attending *some* tea parties. It seemed that there was nothing I could do to change my fate... but in a desperate bid to delay the inevitable, I sent a response that said, “Very well. I am leaving the decision of which particular tea parties I may attend up to you.”

As I was waiting to hear back from my guardians, the day of the inquiry arrived. “I wished to read in my room, bathing in the warm sunlight streaming through my window,” I said, “but there is no helping a summons from the professors...”

The sky outside was an alluring blue, offering more than enough light for me to read my books. It was such a crying shame that I was having to leave my room today, of all days. I slumped my shoulders in disappointment, at which point Hartmut and Philine tried to console me by saying that I could return to my books when the inquiry was over.

Cornelius watched all this with wide eyes. “Are you still not satisfied, Lady Rozemyne?” he asked. “You have been reading nonstop for almost a week and came out of your room only a handful of

times.”

“I could read for the rest of eternity and still not be content,” I said, speaking with the utmost sincerity. “Even after death, I would want to keep reading.”

“Really now...” Cornelius sighed. “Just how serious is this book obsession of yours?”

The inquiry was being held in the Small Hall of the central building. Hirschur was standing outside the door when we arrived, having no doubt been awaiting me.

“Your retainers can stay in a waiting room or return to the dormitory,” she said. “They will receive an ordonnanz to inform them when we are finished.”

Cornelius looked worried to hear this and said, “I believe that knights are allowed to attend meetings.”

“Yes, but this is not a meeting—it is an inquiry. You were all asked to provide your interpretations of events individually, no? Speaking to Lady Rozemyne in isolation is necessary to prevent stealthy signals and other forms of obstruction that would prevent us from cross-referencing testimonies.”

“Hirschur, we are entrusting milady to you,” Rihyarda said. “I will wait here, so there is no need for you to send an ordonnanz.”

“Understood.”

I went inside and saw that the desks were arranged in an upside-down “U” formation of sorts, with the opening closest to me. Sitting at the far end were Rauffen, an unfamiliar man with the build of a Sovereign knight, a blue priest, and Hildebrand, who had Arthur standing behind him. Along the left and right sides were professors of the Royal Academy, not all of whom I recognized.

“Here, Lady Rozemyne,” Hirschur said, directing me to a chair positioned at the center of all the desks. I took a seat, feeling very much like a defendant in a courtroom, and she stood at my side.

“I am glad to see you well, Rozemyne,” Hildebrand said with a smile. “Have you recovered in full?”

I returned a smile and said, “I am fine, as long as I do not push myself.”

“That is good to hear.”

Rauffen nodded in agreement. “So, you’re well enough to be questioned today?” he asked to confirm. I nodded in turn, which prompted Hirschur to introduce those sitting along the farthest line of desks.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, and Immanuel, the Sovereign High Priest.”

Raublut exudes the same STRONG vibes as Father and Grandfather,

but the Sovereign High Priest doesn't seem like our High Priest at all. He comes across as a bit prideful, but he also looks pretty weak.

Perhaps the Sovereign High Priest was just nervous about being in the presence of so many nobles, since he presumably wouldn't have been able to attend the Royal Academy as a blue priest. I decided to interpret his stiff expression in a favorable way.

After the introductions, Rauffen gave an overview of the general flow of events, from the discovery of the ternisbefallen to the moment we defeated it. This was presumably for the sake of the other professors—Rauffen himself seemed well aware of what had gone down, having already heard the details from every single Ehrenfest student, including those who hadn't participated.

"Changes in perspective have given us a number of varying stories, but the core of each remained the same. I've determined that we can trust their testimonies," Rauffen said and then looked at me.

I gazed across the professors and then inhaled deeply. I just needed to follow the advice Ferdinand had given me. My temple upbringing meant that the only weapons and tools I was familiar with were the divine instruments. My upbringing was also the reason I knew so many blessings and so much about the gods, and since nothing about black weapons was taught in the Royal Academy, I hadn't known that we weren't allowed to use them. I was aware of there being a difference between the spell and the prayer for producing black weapons, but that ultimately didn't mean much to me, since I didn't even know the spell to begin with. Those were the points my guardians had told me to focus on, and for any precise questions, I was meant to respond with one of three excuses.

"I am the High Bishop."

"That is simply how things are in the Ehrenfest temple."

"Lord Ferdinand taught me as much."

As I recited the phrases in my head, Rauffen continued. "Only the knights of duchies that need black weapons are permitted to use them, and the spell is not taught even in the Royal Academy. Even so, Lady Rozemyne, you somehow granted all of the students black weapons. You said that you used a blessing, correct?"

"Correct," I replied. "I got everyone to repeat the God of Darkness's blessing, as I knew it was necessary for defeating mana-stealing fey creatures such as trombes."

"And why do you know the blessing?" Rauffen inquired, continuing his questioning with a stern expression.

"As Ehrenfest's High Bishop, it is necessary for me to heal the land after a trombe hunt. During these hunts, I witness the Knight's Order fight trombes, feyplants that steal mana in a fashion similar to ternisbefallens." Ferdinand had told me that trombes appeared only in

Ehrenfest, which was why we were allowed to use black weapons in the first place.

“You accompany Ehrenfest’s Order? Why do they not just summon you after the battle?” Rauffen asked. I could see that he wasn’t the only one confused by my explanation—Raublut the knight commander and Immanuel the Sovereign High Priest were both blinking in surprise. In other duchies, it turned out that the priests and shrine maidens were called after the hunt concluded.

“In the Ehrenfest temple, our High Priest, Lord Ferdinand, participates in the battle,” I replied. “It saves time for both groups to travel together.”

“The High Priest of Ehrenfest participates in battle?!” Immanuel exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief. “That is unthinkable!”

“Lord Ferdinand is a member of the archducal family, but he took the knight course as well,” Rauffen noted. “There is nothing strange at all about him participating in the fight. In fact, considering Ehrenfest’s limited manpower, it’s to be expected. However... Lady Rozemyne, do you participate in the battles?”

“No, of course not. I am but a second-year in the Royal Academy, and I have no intention of taking the knight course. I simply have one of my retainers hold Flutrane’s staff while I wait nearby for the hunt to end.”

Although, on this particular occasion, I worked extra hard to get materials for Roderick...

“Hmm... I understand the peculiarities of the Ehrenfest temple a little better now...” Rauffen muttered. “However, the bible does not contain a prayer that grants the God of Darkness’s blessing. How do you explain that?”

“What? Of course it does. How else would one give the blessing?” I asked, completely taken aback. Rauffen immediately looked to Immanuel, who attempted an explanation.

“There is a prayer to the two supreme gods that is spoken during the Starbind Ceremony, but there is no mention of a blessing from the God of Darkness that would create black weapons,” he intoned. “The High Bishop can speak to this as well.”

“Well, Lady Rozemyne?! Explain yourself!” came an unbearable shriek from Fraularm, who was sitting behind one of the desks to my left. I resisted the urge to cover my ears, and a surge of annoyance coursed through me.

I’m the one who wants an explanation! Of course the bible contains prayers for blessings!

It was then that I realized something—some of the transcribed bibles in the temple book room had certain prayers missing. Was the one being used in the Sovereignty similarly incomplete?

“The bible that I use contains the prayer,” I said. “I’m aware that some bibles have information missing depending on when they were transcribed, so perhaps the prayer in question was omitted from the one used in the Sovereign temple.”

“Are you saying that our bible is mistaken, Lady Rozemyne?” Immanuel asked, his voice now harsh and disconcerted. I was sure that nobody had ever dared to contradict him before, but no matter what he said, I wasn’t about to change my position.

“The bible that I use contains the prayer, so that is my natural conclusion. Lord Ferdinand, the High Priest of Ehrenfest, confirmed the prayer’s existence for himself.” My response must have caught Immanuel off guard, as he was flapping his mouth open and closed, so I turned my attention to Rauffen. “Furthermore, according to Lord Ferdinand, the spell for making black weapons differs from the prayer used to give the God of Darkness’s blessing.”

“What?! The prayer and spells are different? Even though they do the same thing?” Rauffen asked, surprised. I could tell that, once again, the other professors were just as astonished.

“I cannot explain any more than that—I do not know the spell and was told that I will never be taught it, since I am not a knight. However, Lord Ferdinand knows both the spell and the prayer, and that is what he said.”

The spell and the prayer were similar in that they were both used to attack mana-sucking feybeasts, but their effects also had minor differences. There was no need for me to point that out here, though, so I decided not to say anything more.

“I’ve always assumed that prayers and spells were exactly the same...” Rauffen said with a sigh.

All of a sudden, Gundolf, the supervisor of the Drewanchel Dormitory, raised a hand in request of permission to speak. He was the old man I had spoken to last year during my highbeast creation class—and also Hirschur’s research partner and rival, apparently.

“Lady Rozemyne, what interests me most is the regeneration of the gathering spot,” he said. “That made very little sense to me. The ritual you used would normally require many blue priests and shrine maidens—and for several days, at that. You, however, had managed to complete it by the time we arrived.”

“Exactly!” Fraularm shrieked again, standing up from her chair with a loud clatter and staring down her nose at me. “Ehrenfest’s gathering spot should have been poisoned by the ternisbefallen! So, what did you do, Lady Rozemyne? Be honest!”

Gundolf actually put his hands over his ears this time. I wanted to do the same, but with so many eyes on me, it simply wasn’t an option.

“I, too, wish to hear how you managed to perform such a ritual in

less than a bell,” Immanuel said, narrowing his eyes at me and furrowing his brow. He must have been the one who usually oversaw such rituals here.

“The Sovereign High Priest is correct!” Fraularm cried.

“Everything that you do is bizarre and unnatural, Lady Rozemyne! Even your highbeast is strange!” She was apparently one to hold a grudge, as she started whining about the highbeast incident from last year. The surrounding professors grimaced in annoyance, but they still seemed to share her and the Sovereign High Priest’s doubts.

I just wanna go home. I wanna go home and read.

As I gazed across the professors around me, my feelings of apathy only started to grow. I genuinely had no idea how, even with so many of them here, they were unable to understand such a simple concept. The very idea of needing to explain everything from the beginning drained me.

“The temple is not a place that nobles visit often, so while this may be obvious, the questions that you ask of me are reminiscent of asking Ewigeliebe the God of Life what he yearns for most,” I said. It was a fancy euphemism that essentially meant, “How can you not grasp something so obvious?”

Hirschur rubbed her temples. “I understand that Ferdinand often spits venom with a smile, but please refrain from imitating that habit.”

Hm...? I didn't spit any venom. All I did was point out how ignorant everyone's being.

However, it seemed that Hirschur’s interpretation was the common one. Everyone viewed my response as highly insulting.

“And what do you mean by that?” Immanuel asked quietly, his emotionless gray eyes fixed on me. “I was raised in the temple, and I believe that I know more about it than almost any other.”

Ah... Whoops. I just told someone brought up in the temple that they don't know anything about it. I can see why that came across as an insult.

“I was speaking to the professors when I said that. In your case, the nobility is what you struggle to understand,” I replied, trying to clarify my position. Immanuel frowned in response, and some of the professors seemed confused as well, so I continued. “I am an archduke candidate who came first in her class. Do you truly think that my mana capacity can be compared to those of the blue priests and shrine maidens who never attended the Royal Academy, do not own a schtappe, and have not learned to compress their mana? I certainly do not.”

Rauffen and the other professors widened their eyes, their understanding clear on their faces. Immanuel opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it again and gritted his teeth. He had clearly wanted to protest but was unable to do so.

“Professor Rauffen—you say that it takes many blue priests many days to perform the ceremony,” I went on, “but do you not have the mana of several blue priests yourself?”

“I can’t say exactly how it would compare,” Rauffen replied, “but I think I could supply enough mana to take the place of several priests, yes.”

It was only natural that he could; after all, Rauffen was a top-class noble who had been selected to move to the Sovereignty and work as a professor. It was absurd to even compare him to a blue priest.

As Rauffen nodded to himself, Gundolf turned his attention to me and leaned forward. “I understand that all of us professors are capable of providing enough mana for the ritual, and that you are not peculiar in that regard,” he said, “but how do you explain performing it so quickly?”

“Nobles have access to many things that priests do not,” I replied. “The matter is as simple as that. My larger mana capacity did play a role, but the greatest contributing factor was my rejuvenation potions.”

“Aah, I see...” Gundolf said, stroking the potions hanging from his belt.

Nobles always carried rejuvenation potions with them in case they accidentally used too much mana during lessons or whatnot. Temple priests, in contrast, never took lessons at the Academy, so they never learned to make potions for themselves. They had no choice but to wait for their mana to recover naturally, which made a big difference in the grand scheme of things.

Of course, Ferdinand made my rejuvenation potions for me, so they were much more effective than those one learned to make in the Royal Academy, but there was no need for me to point that out. What mattered was making Gundolf understand that nobles had ways to recover their mana, while priests did not.

“In short,” Gundolf said, “you carry with you many rejuvenation potions. As a result, there was no need for you to spend days waiting for your mana to recover, or for you to swap places with others while taking care not to interrupt the ritual. Is that correct?”

And with that short summary, the professors all seemed to understand the situation. This was a good sign. Hopefully, they would allow me to leave the matter at that.

“As Professor Gundolf says, I simply happen to be in the unique circumstances of serving as both an archduke candidate and a High Bishop,” I explained. “The events of that day were nothing unusual at all. Even a professor could perform the ritual as long as they had a divine instrument and could recite the necessary prayers.”

I assumed that would settle things and exhaled in relief, only for

Rauffen to suddenly look up. “Lady Rozemyne, I am told you created a divine instrument for the regeneration ritual,” he said. “Would you care to explain that?”

“How *dare* you make a false divine instrument!” Fraularm shrieked. “I can hardly *believe* the disrespect!” By this point in the discussion, everyone was so used to her outbursts that they glanced over at her and nothing more.

I similarly glanced over at Fraularm, then looked at Rauffen. “As you all know, I was raised in the temple, so when it comes to weapons and the like, I am familiar only with the instruments the gods wield upon the shrine. Lord Ferdinand can trivially create both normal weapons and divine instruments, but embarrassingly enough, I am not that capable. I can only morph my schtappe into the divine instruments, as they are what I am most familiar with using. I imagine that if any given blue priest had a schtappe, then they, too, would experience the same issue.”

In summary, the average noble couldn’t visualize the divine instruments clearly enough to morph their schtappe into one, since they never interacted with them.

Hildebrand stared at me, a glimmer in his light-purple eyes. “Rozemyne, what are the divine instruments like?” he asked, breaking the silence he had maintained up until that point. “I want to see one.”
“Erm...”

The entire room went quiet; nobody had expected the attending royal to speak. Arthur rested a hand on the prince’s shoulder, prompting him to realize his mistake and clasp a hand over his mouth.

“So you make divine instruments, Lady Rozemyne?” Gundolf asked. “I would very much appreciate the chance to see that. A demonstration, if you please.”

“I saw it with my own eyes in class,” Rauffen noted, working alongside his colleague to cover for the prince’s blunder. “Her Leidenschaft’s spear was brilliantly blue and a thing to behold.”

I carefully eyed Hirschur beside me. She thought for a moment and then said, “Might you show us, then? I am sure that some here today still doubt the idea that one could actually form the divine instruments. If you demonstrate it now, it will make your claims that much more believable.”

I could tell from following her eyes that it was Fraularm who still doubted every word of what I was saying. Hirschur added in a whisper that by covering for Hildebrand, I would no doubt earn a favor from his retainers.

“Very well,” I said. “I will morph my schtappe and present a divine instrument. Considering where we are, Leidenschaft’s spear seems a little too dangerous, so I would rather create Flutrane’s staff,

which I used during the regeneration ritual. Would that be satisfactory, Prince Hildebrand?”

The prince gave a relieved smile, having been flustered from his mistake. “Yes. Thank you, Rozemyne.”

I returned a smile and then extended a hand to Hirschur; I couldn’t gracefully stand up from my seat without assistance. A moment passed in silence before she realized my intention and obliged.

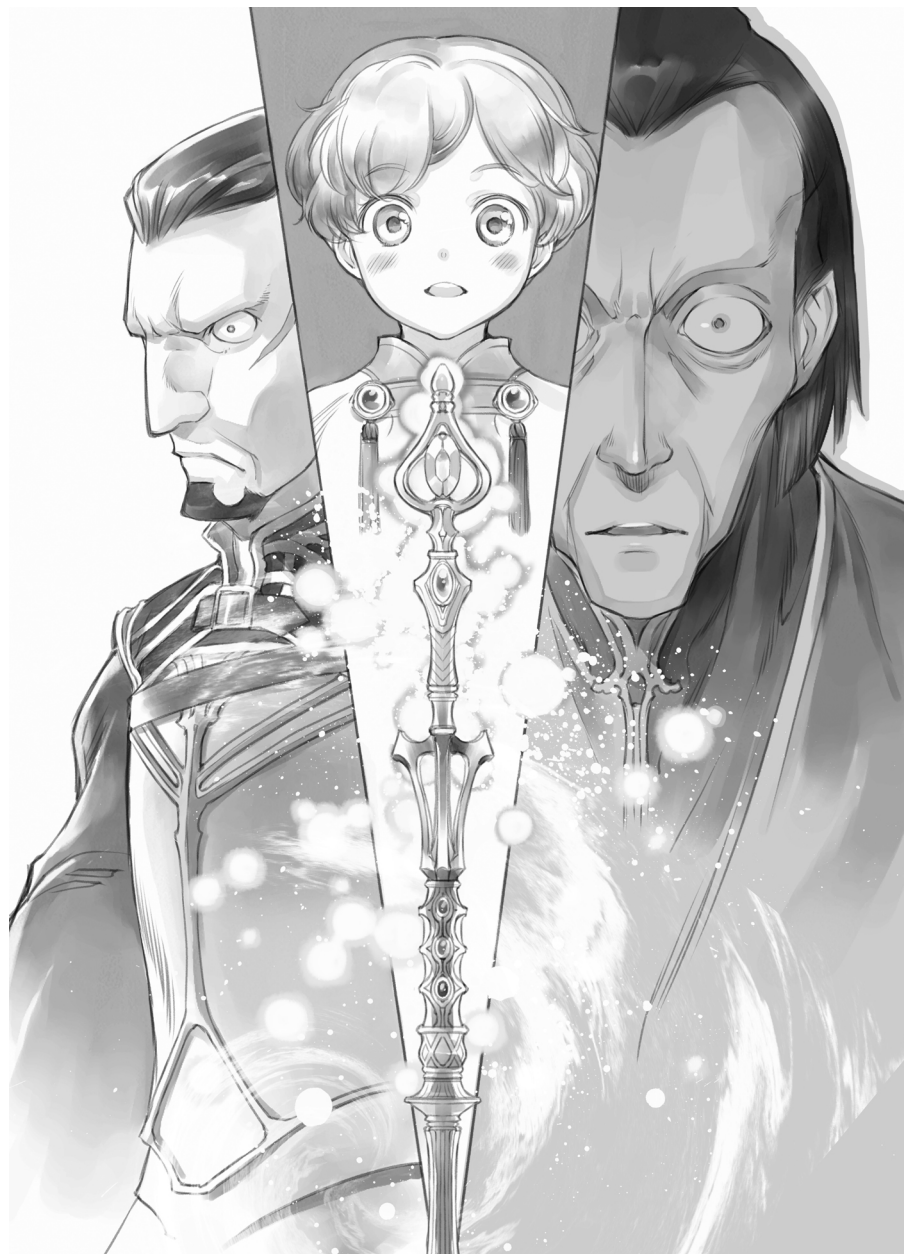
After coming to my feet, I produced my schtappe. It was very simple in design—I certainly hadn’t put much work into making it fancy like Wilfried’s—but everyone leaned forward nonetheless. Even if their expressions were unchanged, they were blatantly curious to see what happened next. And most curious of all seemed to be Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander.

I inhaled as all eyes fell on me. My schtappe wouldn’t morph unless I could produce a crystal clear mental image of my desired result, and messing up here would be disastrous. I closed my eyes and envisioned Flutrane’s staff.

“*Streitkolben*,” I said, and an instant later, Flutrane’s staff was in my hand. The long shaft was ornately carved and dotted with rows of tiny feystones. An elaborate work of gold at the end enveloped a large green feystone, which was glowing with gently pulsating light, since the divine instruments made with my mana were filled with mana at all times.

Immanuel stood up with a clatter, his previously dead eyes now filled with shock and transfixion. “Flutrane’s staff...” he croaked. His head swayed as though he were drunk, and he leaned closer, trying to take in as much of the instrument as possible.

This reaction seemed to confirm to all those present that the staff really was Flutrane’s. A stir ran through the room, and everyone wore looks of surprise or curiosity. Hildebrand, alone, was regarding me with innocent awe and praise.



“I see the divine instruments are very pretty...” the prince said. “I had never seen one before. Thank you for accommodating my wish.”

“It was my honor, Prince Hildebrand,” I replied and then chanted “*rucken*” to revert my schtappe; there was no need to maintain the transformation when he was already satisfied.

No sooner had the staff disappeared than the professors snapped back to reality. They readjusted themselves in their seats until they were sitting straight and proper once more. Immanuel continued to stare at me for a while longer, his eyes wide, then slowly sat back down like the others. With his eyes closed, he whispered, “So, one truly can make the divine instruments with a schtappe...”

“Well, that’s that—it only makes sense that Lady Rozemyne would possess more mana than a blue priest,” Rauffen said. It sounded a lot like he was bringing this meeting to a close, and I clenched my fists victoriously.

Perfect. He’s convinced. I’ve settled everything. I can finally leave!

Or so I thought; Immanuel slowly looked at me and said, “I am not yet convinced.” His voice was just as quiet and polite as before, but now, his eyes seemed to be gleaming. “Your mana capacity is far greater than that of an average blue priest—that much cannot be denied. We also cannot deny that a noble could complete the ritual much faster than usual through the use of potions. Instead, my issue lies with your explanation for the God of Darkness’s blessing.”

The professors looked up. It seemed as though our inquiry had reached its natural conclusion, but here Immanuel was, trying to rekindle the dying flame. I was struck with the urge to rub my temples like Ferdinand and groan, “For what sane reason would you do this?”

“Lady Rozemyne—you claim that the bible used in the Sovereign Temple is mistaken, but that cannot be true,” Immanuel continued. “It was granted to us by the first king, and we have ensured its preservation ever since. Does it not seem more likely that the version kept in Ehrenfest is the oddment and contains sections that were added unnecessarily?”

I couldn’t offer a response. Although the prayer in question had actually been featured in our bible, Bezewanst certainly had made notes all throughout the holy book, so it was true to say that ours was tampered with.

Ngh... Curse you, Bezewanst!

“Your silence speaks volumes!” Fraularm screeched. “You made heinous changes to the bible! Goodness! Oh, goodness me! How sacrilegious!”

As I was suppressing the urge to shout, “It was the previous High Bishop, not me!” in response, Rauffen glared at her. “Fraularm, could

you keep quiet?" he said. "You forget yourself. This is temple business—it's not for us professors to get involved in."

"Goodness!" Fraularm shrieked again; then, she sat down and pursed her lips in frustration. I could tell that Hildebrand was giving me a panicked look.

Well, the bible is the symbol of the High Bishop's authority, but... That's a rather strange way of putting it.

I rested a deliberate hand on my cheek and tilted my head at Immanuel. "That certainly isn't a perspective we've considered," I said. "Would that mean Ehrenfest added a random prayer to the bible, and that it just so happened to have the power to grant the God of Darkness's blessing?"

"Th-That is not what I..." Immanuel replied, but his nervous stuttering was cut short by a bark of laughter from the knight commander. Raublut, who had thus far remained silent, turned to give the Sovereign High Priest a nasty grin.

"If some priests in the Ehrenfest temple can get blessings by chanting random prayers, that'd make them better than you lot in the Sovereign temple," he said. It was an interestingly critical remark—I had assumed the three at the Sovereignty table were on good terms on account of them all sitting together, but that evidently wasn't the case. "Doesn't this mean the bible you keep saying will show the path to the true king is, in fact, missing a bunch of pieces?" he continued. "Could you really call a king chosen by something so lacking the proper king?"

Wait... Is Raublut opposed to the biblical fundamentalists or something?

"The Sovereign bible is the correct one," Immanuel retorted. "I would rather you keep your sacrilegious comments to yourself."

"We'll see about that. It seems the Saint of Ehrenfest has other ideas."

My earlier statement had more or less poured oil onto the sparks that were already flying between the faction supporting the current king and the biblical fundamentalists. In my thoughts, I dropped to my knees and groveled at the feet of an imaginary Ferdinand.

I'm sorry! So sorry! I might have just made a really serious mistake! It's not my fault, though! I've said from the beginning that we used the God of Darkness's blessing, so I couldn't lie about where I read the prayer! And our bible certainly isn't the inaccurate one here!

As the Sovereign knight commander Raublut and the Sovereign High Priest Immanuel glared at each other, Gundolf spoke up with a peaceful smile. "Could I ask the two of you to calm down?" Having an older man there to mediate the situation seemed to work wonders, as they both shut their mouths and turned to face forward—that is,

toward me.

Immanuel was watching me carefully, as though there was something he wished to say. Raublut, in contrast, had a more amused expression. I wanted to run from them both.

“Hm...” Gundolf eyed the three of us one by one while stroking his beard. “Perhaps it would be best to bring both the Sovereign and Ehrenfest bibles together to compare them? We professors have no business with the temple, and we have seen neither bible, so there is little we can determine on our own.”

Although he was trying to come across as an impartial third party, it was clear that Gundolf simply wanted to see the bibles for himself. His seemingly kind gesture was actually a scheme to appease his rampant curiosity—he didn’t appear to care whether the king had the divine mandate or the fundamentalists were right. In fact, I was doubtful that he cared about anything I was saying at all.

“That is an excellent idea, Professor Gundolf. By comparing the two bibles side by side, we can see which one is correct for ourselves,” Hirschur said, an unmistakable sparkle in her eyes. I could tell from the merriment in her voice that she found the whole idea very entertaining.

If you asked me, the mad scientists were better off shutting up and allowing those of us serving the temple to deal with this problem. Little did they know, their suggestion was exceptionally dangerous. Our bible now contained weird text and a magic circle that seemed to pop up whenever the book was opened, and if other people saw it, they’d immediately assume we were challenging the current king. What was the solution here?

“Unfortunately, I am unable to bring Ehrenfest’s bible here,” I said. “Each duchy’s temple has only the one, no? I would find it much more convenient to bring a transcribed copy.”

“Oh! Goodness!” Fraularm exclaimed. “This gives us even more reason to investigate Ehrenfest’s bible for any strange inclusions! Lady Rozemyne is *clearly* trying to hide something!”

“N-No, I’m not!” I protested, but it was no use—Immanuel already had a determined glint in his eye.

“Comparing bibles seems to be ideal,” he said. His expression betrayed as little emotion as usual, but I could sense his resolve. “I will ask the High Bishop for ours.”

My chance of salvaging the situation had taken a nosedive, while the odds of me receiving a lecture were higher than ever. I needed to take action. Unless I could think of a way to resolve this peacefully and without needing to present our bible, my reading time would take a massive hit.

Um, let’s see... Maybe I could double down on us not being able to

bring our bible and propose that we just agree the Sovereign bible is correct, despite its missing prayer. No, that would only make things worse. They'd assume I was picking a fight, and the demands to see our bible would only increase. Gahhh! A good idea! Please, let me come up with a good idea!

As I was desperately racking my brain, Rauffen came up with his own suggestion. "The Sovereign High Bishop brings his temple's bible to the Royal Academy for royal debuts and the Starbinding Ceremony. Surely it can't be much of an issue for you to do the same."

"Indeed," Gundolf agreed.

Nah, nah, nah. It'll be a huge issue. Ferdinand will yell at me for sure!

I was desperately searching for an escape, but no good excuses came to mind. And as I continued to agonize, the conversation carried on without me.

Hold on! Please! I'm thinking right now!

In the end, the decision was made without my input—the two bibles were going to be inspected and compared. The professors rose from their seats and started to bid their farewells until then.

"Now, Lady Rozemyne—do you have any disagreements?"

"I am already content to agree that the Sovereign bible is correct, so I see no need for this comparison. Everyone is so busy. Is this not just a waste of valuable time?" It was a last-ditch attempt, but before I could even ask for the comparison meeting to be canceled, Fraularm barked some nonsense about my guilt being obvious.

Rauffen shut Fraularm up with a grin and then turned to me. "Don't worry, Lady Rozemyne—I don't think you're lying. You were able to give the God of Darkness's blessing, so the prayer must be in your bible. We just want to see it for ourselves."

"Is that really necessary for us to agree that the Sovereign bible is correct?" I asked, but it seemed that I was the only one who considered it unneeded. Everyone else was enthusiastic about the inspection—especially the professors with scientific streaks.

Most enthusiastic of all was Raublut, who looked down at Immanuel with a taunting smirk. "As of now, we can't say for sure whether the Sovereign temple's bible is correct. We need to take a close look at both—such is what King Trauerqual would want. Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, your help here will be very much appreciated."

"Will" be? I suppose because, even if I were to refuse, you'd order me to comply anyway.

"Understood," I replied while slumping my shoulders. At the moment, I was technically bringing the bible of my own volition. Trying to refuse any longer would only result in the request turning into an order, which would infuriate my guardians to no end.

"Alright, Lady Rozemyne," Rauffen said. "Have Lord Ferdinand

bring the bible, since he can understand both nobles and priests.”

Um, what...? Ferdinand? Pray tell, why is his name coming up now, out of absolutely nowhere?

I could only blink in confusion, at which point Rauffen grinned and gave me a wooden letter of invitation. “All of your explanations seemed to have come from Lord Ferdinand in one way or another. I expect that he’s the only person able to explain the differences between the Darkness spell and prayer. Not to mention... I want to use this opportunity to have a long talk with him about you joining the knight course.”

Wait—what does that last point have to do with anything?!

Going into the inquiry, my plan had been to quash everyone’s protests and escape scot-free... but now, my protests were the ones being quashed.

Strange. It wasn’t supposed to be this way...

I was in a complete daze when I exited the Small Hall. The most I could do was stare at the letter of invitation in my hands.

As soon as I returned to the dorm, Wilfried told me to give a report on the inquiry. I explained everything that had transpired while my retainers gathered around me.

“What?! They summoned one of your guardians?!” Wilfried exclaimed. “That usually never happens, unless it’s something major like someone being expelled from the Royal Academy.”

This incident was far, far worse than something like an expulsion, and it involved many more people. However, I put on as peaceful a smile as I could muster and said, “This is merely so they can check our duchy’s bible, which is also why Ferdinand was summoned, not Sylvester. I do not expect to be expelled from the Royal Academy or anything of the sort.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about! This shouldn’t be happening in the first place!”

“You have a point, but what more can I say...?”

It wasn’t as though I wanted this to happen; everyone had taken a peculiar interest in my bible, for some reason. Not to mention, I really had put my all into coming up with an excuse of some kind that would afford me a way out. I just hadn’t been able to come up with anything.

“Write a thorough report to Uncle. His follow-up questions are going to be brutal.”

“I know.”

Alongside my report to Ehrenfest, I sent the letter of invitation that Rauffen had given me. The meeting was scheduled for the morning three days from now.

Sigh... I can feel my reading time disappearing. In the end, it was all but a fragile dream.

And so, I became the first archduke candidate in Ehrenfest history to have one of their guardians summoned to the Royal Academy.

The Bible Inspection Meeting

At fifth bell on the day before the meeting, Ferdinand arrived at the Royal Academy with Eckhart and Justus to begin preparations. The welcoming students were waiting nervously in the common room, and after looking them over, he began to give his instructions.

“Rihyarda, prepare a room in which I can speak to Rozemyne.”

“Understood.”

Rihyarda left at once with Brunhilde in tow, at which point Ferdinand turned to Wilfried and Charlotte, who were standing at the center of the gathered students. “My being summoned here is connected to the ternisbefallen incident,” he said. “As it remains a secret that Ehrenfest slew the beast, my arrival will not be widely known. You may rest easy and continue to socialize as I unilaterally resolve this situation. Keep the dormitory in order.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Wilfried replied. “We will.”

A guardian being summoned to the Royal Academy was indicative of there being an issue too great for the children to resolve themselves. Wilfried had stressed to the point of shivering about how massive the problem must be, but upon hearing that Ferdinand would handle it, a calm smile spread across his face.

“Justus,” Ferdinand said, “once my room is ready, ensure that preparations for the Interduchy Tournament are progressing smoothly.”

“As you command.”

As requested, Justus went to prepare a room for Ferdinand to spend the night in. Ferdinand glanced at him, then immediately focused on Hartmut. “Hartmut, as the oldest archscholar of the apprentices, I ask you to take command of a team and prepare documents such that you may bring Justus up to speed at once.”

Hartmut and Philine turned at once, having become used to doing tasks for Ferdinand while helping him at the temple, but the other apprentice scholars seemed dumbfounded and simply watched with wide eyes. Hartmut clapped a hand on Roderick’s shoulder on the way to his room.

“Shape up, Roderick. We need to hurry. Lord Justus works faster than you’d ever believe.”

Roderick came back to his senses and started chasing after Hartmut—and a beat later, so did the other apprentice scholars.

Rihyarda returned to inform us that our room was prepared just as the common room was getting busy.

“Rozemyne, come with me,” Ferdinand said, and we both followed Rihyarda to a small meeting room. He told me to be seated opposite him, so I took the chair that Lieseleta pulled out for me.

Guh. He's going to get mad about me causing more problems for him.

I placed a hand on my stomach and furtively glanced at Ferdinand, whose face showed no emotion. This wasn't my fault—not much, at least—but it was still an unshakable fact that Ferdinand was now wrapped up in nonsense he shouldn't have had to deal with in the first place.

“As this has to do with the bible that only the High Bishop may use, those unrelated to the temple must depart,” Ferdinand said.

“Guards may remain at the door.”

“Ferdinand, my boy!” Rihyarda exclaimed, her eyebrows raised in a sudden flare of anger. “You must not be alone in a room with milady!”

“Stand down, Rihyarda. This is not for others to hear, and every moment is valuable.”

“My boy! She is an engaged woman! You must not put her in such a compromising situation. Allow her retainers to stay, at the very least.”

From the position of a noble, her argument made perfect sense—it was actually quite strange that we had gotten away with so many one-on-one meetings in the temple. However, I could guess that Ferdinand wanted to talk about the magic circle that had risen into the air above the bible. It was a topic of conversation much too dangerous for our retainers to hear.

Ferdinand thought for a moment, his brow tightly knit, then nodded. “Very well. Eckhart and Cornelius may remain, but nobody else,” he said, waving the others away.

“I would much rather you keep another girl with you, but... I suppose family is more comfortable,” Rihyarda agreed and then exited the room.

Once everyone else was gone and the door was firmly shut, Ferdinand turned to the two guard knights. “Both of you, stand facing the door.”

“Yes, sir!” Eckhart said and complied at once. Cornelius, however, blinked and froze up. His training had instilled in him a habit of always keeping his eyes on the one he was guarding.

“Hurry up!” Ferdinand barked.

“Yes, sir!”

Cornelius turned to the door as well, and with that, both he and Eckhart were standing with their backs to us. Ferdinand took out

sound-blocking magic tools and proffered one to me, and it was then that I truly understood the order he had given to the two guard knights—it seemed that he didn't even want to chance our lips being read. He was being so intense that I couldn't help but feel even more anxious.

"Ferdinand, I truly am sorry. I was, erm, unable to oppose their decisions to investigate our bible and summon you here..." I said as I grabbed the magic tool. My aim was to establish my innocence before Ferdinand started grinding me to dust, but no sooner had I started to apologize than he waved a dismissive hand at me.

"No matter. It was well within expectations that I would receive a summons. In fact, I instructed you to include my name in your answers specifically to bring about this outcome. This is much preferable to the alternative of you facing the meeting alone."

Apparently, Ferdinand had predicted that one of my guardians would end up being summoned. I exhaled, relieved to know that he wasn't angry at me, and shifted my focus to the coming meeting.

"Still..." I said. "This has turned into quite a serious problem, hasn't it?"

"I am unsure what is problematic about it."

"Wha? But, erm... what if someone else sees the magic circle?" He had sounded so very serious when ordering me not to tell anyone about it; surely there was a disaster on the horizon.

Ferdinand crossed his arms and watched me through slightly narrowed eyes. "That will not warrant any concern if we cannot see the circle ourselves. In other words, you need only keep your mouth shut and say nothing unnecessary. I am here precisely to ensure that outcome."

As not even Justus had managed to see the text and the magic circle, Ferdinand was under the impression that only those who met certain requirements could view them. Perhaps these requirements were to do with elemental affinities, divine protection from the gods, or mana capacity. He also assumed there were entirely different requirements on top of those, since there was no other explanation for why both Ferdinand and I could suddenly see them.

"I imagine that nobody else at the meeting will be able to see it for themselves."

"And if somebody does, what should I do?"

"Nothing at all, for we cannot see it ourselves. Those who can see it might foolishly read it aloud and make an enemy of royalty to no gain, or they might keep silent and just as foolishly aim to take the throne themselves. But that is their choice to make, and it does not concern us. You need only focus on not bringing harm to Ehrenfest. Now, feign surprise and say, 'You can see something in the air?'"

It was then that I realized—I already knew someone who had the potential to see the magic circle, and who was honest enough that they would mention its presence outright.

“Prince Hildebrand attended the *ternisbefallen* inquiry,” I said. “As a member of royalty, he is expected to oversee the resolution of any problems that arise in the Royal Academy, so he will presumably be attending this meeting as well. Do we need to worry about him potentially seeing the circle?”

“Tell me, what issue is there with the son of a king being recognized as a true king? An outcome like that is trivial compared to completely unrelated persons such as us suddenly receiving that kind of attention. On the chance that both Prince Sigiswald and Prince Hildebrand can see the circle, they may fight among themselves for the seat. If only one of them can see it, that individual can become king. If neither prince sees it, things can continue as they are.”

I was still confused. Hildebrand had spent his entire life thus far being raised as a vassal. Learning that he had the qualities of a king would enliven his retainers and force him into a conflict with Sigiswald, who was already so close to being named the official successor to the throne. It would be disastrous, surely.

“So you say... but Prince Hildebrand was raised as a vassal,” I said.

“He was only recently baptized and has yet to even be debuted. Should the investigation reveal that he has the qualities of a king, there is still time for his education to be adjusted, and as a child with *Dunkelfelger* blood, he has powerful allies. Prince Hildebrand would need to acquire the *Grutrisheit*, of course—I am sure the current king can speak to how extraordinarily hard running the country is without it.”

“Is it hard for a king to rule *Yurgenschmidt* without the *Grutrisheit*, then?”

“I would imagine it being similar to a new archduke coming into power after the abrupt death of their predecessor without having been taught about the foundational magic. The new archduke would need to mobilize their entire house to search for it while supplying it with mana from the hall. One can maintain the existing state while supplying mana, but that is all—one could not repair or do anything else to it whatsoever.”

The lower city’s *entwickeln* had required direct involvement with the foundational magic, and Hasse’s monastery had similarly been built with Sylvester’s permission. An archduke without knowledge of the foundation was hardly deserving of the title and would not be able to use the magic entrusted only to archdukes.

“You sure are well informed, Ferdinand.”

“As an archduke candidate yourself, you will also learn about the foundational magic soon enough. I highly doubt that Sylvester has every word memorized, but even he knows it.”

Ferdinand didn't seem at all uneasy about the upcoming meeting. Although it was comforting to see, at the same time, I couldn't understand it. It was for this reason that I asked, “Are you not concerned about the bible inspection meeting...?”

“We need only demonstrate three things: that the Ehrenfest bible contains a prayer for the God of Darkness's blessing, that said prayer is not identical to the spell for creating black weapons, and that Ehrenfest students did not violate the king's law. As the bible does indeed contain the prayer, we need only show it.”

His words reminded me that the true reason for the inquiry was to understand the ternisbefallen incident. This investigation into our duchy's bible had only come about from the squabble between the Sovereign High Priest and the Sovereign knight commander.

“The state of the Sovereign bible has nothing to do with Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand continued. “You need not concern yourself with the actions of the Sovereign temple or the Sovereign knight commander—it is the king's duty to contain them both or stir the conflict. To be honest, my only real concern here is you.”

Knowing exactly what we needed to do came as something of a relief. I had worried the situation was out of control, but it seemed that everything would turn out fine so long as I entrusted the meeting to Ferdinand.

“Very well,” I said. “I'm electing to leave absolutely everything to you, while I spend the entire meeting in silence.”

“I could not hope for more.”

Our discussion had come to an end after we ironed out some more details, and at precisely third bell the next day, our meeting with the Sovereignty began. The desks were lined up in the same formation as during the previous inquiry, but this time, the Sovereign High Bishop was sitting next to Immanuel. There was no mistaking him, since he wore the same white robes I was so accustomed to. Hearing the phrase “High Bishop” always brought Bezewanst to mind, but this man only looked to be about forty and was more or less in his prime.

“This is Relichion, the Sovereign High Bishop,” Immanuel said. “He has brought with him the Sovereign temple's bible.”

Once greetings were exchanged, the meeting could begin in earnest. Raublut stood up and explained in a booming voice that my statements during the previous inquiry had necessitated this investigation, to see whether the Sovereign temple's bible was indeed missing anything.

“Now then,” Raublut said, “to begin, show us Ehrenfest’s bible.”

“I wish to object,” Ferdinand replied, standing up with the bible in hand.

“You what?” Raublut asked, blinking.

“The invitation I received said this was a meeting to ensure that no Ehrenfest students violated the king’s law during the ternisbefallen incident,” Ferdinand continued with a very noble-like smile. “Our intention today is not to investigate any potential shortcomings in the Sovereign temple’s bible. It seems that I have mistakenly attended an entirely different meeting.”

Hm... If it were me up there in place of the knight commander, Ferdinand probably would have said something like, “Have you forgotten our reason for being here, fool?”

Ferdinand stared down the knight commander with a smile, making it clear that Ehrenfest had nothing to do with the Sovereign temple’s bible.

Raublut scoffed, but he quickly conceded the matter. “You’re not wrong. Now, show your bible, so that we might prove Ehrenfest did not violate the king’s law.”

“As you wish,” Ferdinand replied, stepping forward and setting the bible down before Raublut. He was wearing a thin, fake smile for dealing with other nobles, but to me, it looked absolutely terrifying. “Rozemyne, open the lock.”

After borrowing Hirschur’s hand to get down from my chair, I stuck my key into the bible and opened it. The text and magic circle rose up into the air, as they had done before.

“Blank pages,” Raublut said plainly and with a grimace as he flipped through the bible. Hirschur, who was standing here under the guise of assisting me, wore an almost identical expression. I could guess that she wasn’t able to see the contents either.

“Goodness!” Fraularm shrieked. “We’ve come this far and you’re bringing fake books?! How sacrilegious!”

“I see...” Ferdinand said, making no attempt to hide his displeasure as he shot Fraularm a glare. “I was starting to believe that the quality of graduates dropped following the civil war, but I see now that the teachers are where the problem resides.”

I agreed with his assessment but wished that he had dressed it up a little more. Fraularm would no doubt take her frustrations about this insult out on me, as his disciple.

“Remain silent,” Ferdinand continued. “Incompetent fools who cannot stay quiet until the facts have been explained to them are nothing but a bother. Now, to return to the matter at hand... It is only natural that these pages would appear blank, as temple bibles can only be read by those with the relevant High Bishop’s permission.”

“Then grant all those here permission,” Hirschur said eagerly.

“That will not be possible,” Ferdinand replied, crushing her hopes with a gentle smile. “Only those who are part of the temple are qualified to read these bibles.”

“Excuse me? Whatever do you mean?!”

“Goodness!” Fraularm added.

Ferdinand gazed across the surprised professors and then continued in a quiet voice. “These bibles are not meant to be taken from their temples.”

“But—”

“I am confident that showing them to a select few will suffice. Prince Hildebrand, as the arbitrator, Commander Raublut, who participated in the hunt and already knows the spell, and those who serve the temple.”

“Lord Ferdinand!” Hirschur exclaimed. I could tell from the desperation in her eyes that she was more or less on the verge of crying out, “Don’t be so mean!”

Ferdinand sighed. “As the God of Darkness’s prayer grants similar effects to black weapons, it would not be wise to spread knowledge of it so freely. It is wonderful for professors to be so inquisitive, but that is another issue entirely.”

The spell for black weapons was taught only to the knights of duchies where it was absolutely necessary—even scholars who wished to research the spell could not learn it without the king’s permission. In other words, Ferdinand was being entirely reasonable, and the mad scientist professors were unable to protest, no matter how much they wanted to.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. “Your permission.”

I nodded and then said, “I permit Prince Hildebrand, Lord Raublut, Father Relichion, Immanuel, and Lord Ferdinand to read the bible.”

Now... how is Prince Hildebrand going to react?

I watched the prince out of the corner of my eye. As a member of royalty, perhaps he would see the magic circle. Ferdinand had said that this wouldn’t be a problem, but I couldn’t help my worrying.

“Ah. I can see text now,” Hildebrand said.

“Hm,” Raublut added. “I didn’t realize these bibles were magic tools...”

Despite my concern, it seemed that Hildebrand was unable to see the floating text or magic circle—his purple eyes contained no surprise as he quietly waited for the page to be turned. Raublut’s expression barely changed at all, suggesting that he couldn’t see them either.

“Now, I would request that you open the Sovereign temple’s bible and grant them permission to read it,” Ferdinand prompted the

Sovereign High Bishop.

Relichion set down a bible that looked identical to ours, unlocked it, opened it to the same page, and then granted permission to the same people. I was included among them, of course.

Oh? I don't see a magic circle or the text...

The text written in the bible was the same, but nothing rose up from the pages and into the air.

"They're identical," Hildebrand observed as we went through the two bibles' pages one by one. He was right, aside from all the notes scribbled next to the prayers for the baptism ceremony, coming-of-age ceremony, and such in the Ehrenfest copy.

"Ehrenfest's bible certainly contains many additions..." Immanuel said, squinting as he looked down at the pages.

"I believe the previous High Bishop wrote those," Ferdinand replied before I could even open my mouth. "Old language often proves too complicated for commoners of the lower city to understand, so many parts were rewritten in common vernacular."

Indeed. Like cue cards for a TV show.

"So, where's the prayer for the God of Darkness's blessing?" Raublut asked.

I turned to a page that was pretty far into the bible, where the lesser-used prayers were generally found. "Here. This part details the prayer in question."

Immanuel examined the page for a moment and then said, "Where? I see nothing at all." The Sovereign High Bishop looked equally as confused, so I assumed that he wasn't able to see anything either.

"It's right there," Raublut noted. "Hard to read, since the language is so ancient, but the words can't be missed."

"Yes, I can see it too," Hildebrand agreed. "Although, I would struggle to read it as well."

"How far can the two of you manage?" Ferdinand asked the Sovereign High Priest and High Bishop. They looked at the bible again and then indicated a section about halfway through, where the notes in the Ehrenfest copy began to increase in density. "As these bibles are magic tools, it is possible that some sections can be seen only by those with enough mana and the right affinities. Perhaps the Sovereign bible is not incomplete, and this is instead a problem of mana. In which case, it is only natural that an archduke candidate such as Rozemyne would be able to read more."

"Makes sense," Raublut said. He started flipping through the Sovereign bible but then paused halfway through, presumably because he could no longer see the contents of the pages. I was also unable to see past where he had stopped.

“Given that no single person here can understand more of the Sovereign bible than the rest, we can assume that the Sovereign High Bishop’s elements and mana capacity are responsible, as he is its owner,” Ferdinand muttered, now completely in scientist mode. “There is much we might be able to learn if we gather all the bibles together and investigate them directly.”

I tugged on his sleeve and pointed at Hirschur. *Aren’t you the one forgetting why we’re here now, Ferdinand? We need to prove Ehrenfest’s innocence, not start comparing even more bibles, right? You look just like Hirschur right now.*

My silent prodding must have been heard, as Ferdinand coughed once and then seemed to regain his composure. The others were still focused on comparing the bibles.

“I can read Rozemyne’s bible up to this point,” Hildebrand said. “Hm? But I can actually read a little more of this part here. I wonder why?”

“There’s a small spot here that I can’t see, but everything else on the page is visible. It stops here for me,” Raublut added. It seemed that he could read a little further than the prince, but they both saw blank spaces on the pages.

Hm... Maybe they lack an affinity for Life?

As I tried to speculate what elemental affinities they had based on the blank spots, Hildebrand smiled at me and said, “How far can you read, Rozemyne?”

Erm... All the way to the end.

I got the feeling that such an admission would only cause problems, so instead, I rested a troubled hand on my cheek and took a step back. Ferdinand stepped forward in my place. “Both Rozemyne and I can read up to the same point as the Sovereign knight commander,” he said, “so perhaps the limitation is not his, but Rozemyne’s.”

“Oh?” Raublut replied, raising an eyebrow as he compared the two of us. My heart started pounding in my chest. Perhaps he had realized that I was trying to leave all the actual speaking to Ferdinand.

Ferdinand casually turned back to the page with the God of Darkness’s prayer. “I believe we have established that the Sovereign temple’s bible lacks the prayer not because it is incomplete, but because the Sovereign High Bishop does not have the required affinities or enough mana to see it. This is further evidenced by the fact that our High Bishop, an archduke candidate, has managed to confirm its existence.”

Raublut shook his head. “Unfortunately, the language here is so ancient that we can’t yet say how it differs from the spell we normally use.”

“I will assist with this investigation myself. Rozemyne is an archduke candidate, not a knight; there is no need for her to learn the black spell.” Ferdinand then held out a sound-blocking tool to Raublut. Once they were both gripping them, he took out his schtappe and morphed it into a knife, then turned it into a black weapon while covering his mouth.

“Oho. So, that’s a black weapon? This is my first time seeing one,” came but one of many mutterings from those gathered. It seemed that even among Sovereign professors, many didn’t know the spell themselves.

Ferdinand and Raublut spoke for a little while longer before Ferdinand canceled the blessing. Raublut then turned to the rest of us and declared that Ehrenfest’s blessing was not the same as the black spell, meaning that the Ehrenfest apprentice knights and I would not be punished for using black weapons. I revoked the bible permissions I had granted, then closed the book and locked it again.

Okay. Done.

We had safely navigated the meeting. I gazed up, relieved, only to make immediate eye contact with Immanuel, who was staring at both me and the bible with fervorous intensity. “Would it not be more fitting for Lady Rozemyne to serve as the High Bishop in the Sovereignty rather than in Ehrenfest?” he asked. “We should have gotten Ehrenfest to send her over in place of those sorry blue priests from before.”

His gaze was so intimidating that I turned around, grabbed Ferdinand by the sleeve, and tried to hide behind his arm. Ferdinand noticed what was going on and immediately stepped forward to shield me. “Rozemyne is an archduke candidate and cannot be taken by the Sovereignty,” he flatly replied, staring down at Immanuel with cold eyes. “If you do not know even that much, priest, then you would do well to remain silent on noble matters.”

“I see...” Immanuel whispered, his eyes lowered. “Archduke candidates cannot be brought to the Sovereign temple.”

Meanwhile, Relichion was watching Immanuel with harsh eyes—an expected reaction, considering the man’s indirect suggestion that he should give up his position as High Bishop. The professors of the Royal Academy were similarly regarding Immanuel as though he were an outsider, while Raublut was looking between him, Ferdinand, and me in apparent consideration. The atmosphere was so prickly that I was eternally thankful to have Ferdinand to hide behind.

Thank goodness he’s here. There was something terrifying about Immanuel just now. Talk about scary.

As I continued to hide behind his sleeve, ready to dash behind his back at any time, Raublut and Rauffen briefly summarized the

differences between the spell and prayer. Then, once Hildebrand had granted his permission, the meeting was brought to a close.

“We are finished here, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, turning with the bible in his arms. I agreed with the sentiment that we should leave at once and promptly started following after him.

“One moment, please,” Rauffen called out, interrupting our escape. “I wish to have a conversation about Lady Rozemyne attending the knight course.”

“No,” Ferdinand replied, shooting him down before the discussion could even begin. “Rozemyne has learned practically all that the knight course offers through her efforts in getting the one and only Angelica to graduate. There is no point in her attending classes.”

“But what about ditter?” Rauffen protested.

After not even a moment, Ferdinand flicked a sound-blocking tool toward Rauffen, who deftly caught it. Ferdinand then said something before extending a hand and retrieving the magic tool.

Rauffen stared at me, his jaw dropped. “No way...” he muttered. “That can’t be true.”

“I have no cause to be untruthful,” Ferdinand said. “Now, speak of this to no one, and cease inviting her to the knight course. You will never receive permission from Ehrenfest. Never.” And with that, he spun back around and briskly walked away. I was, of course, hot on his heels.

“Ferdinand, what did you tell Professor Rauffen?” I asked once we were back in the dormitory.

“I simply mentioned that, because of the jureve, you are still unable to function without the assistance of magic tools. I also said that, for various reasons, you have charms that must be kept on at all times. Unless he is quite the staggering fool, he will not attempt to recruit you again.”

A normal person would easily conclude that someone entirely dependent on magic tools was no match for the practical lessons of the knight course, but there were some who would reach the nonsensical conclusion that they were perfectly viable candidates so long as they could move. That was why Ferdinand had also mentioned that I needed to wear several charms at all times. They would activate during training and inevitably expose other students to danger, and we had no plans of removing them.

“Professor Rauffen will give up now, right?” I asked. I was still feeling a bit uneasy, since I was painfully aware of what a stubborn man he was.

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow, then scoffed. “Fear not. If necessary, I will put an end to his days as a teacher.”

How is that supposed to put me at ease?

His words made me even more fearful, if anything. But as it turned out, Rauffen was no fool after all. He never pushed me to join the knight course again.

Planning for the Tea Party

I had assumed that Ferdinand would return to Ehrenfest right after the meeting, but he and Justus first checked with the scholars regarding the Interduchy Tournament and then began instructing them to add new research to their presentation.

“What new research, exactly?” I asked.

“Simple research regarding the bible’s prayers,” Ferdinand replied. “I imagine Professor Hirschur will descend upon you the moment I leave, asking for documents about the bible so that she might learn more. You must shoo her away and inform her that the details will be presented at the Interduchy Tournament. I do not want her summoning me over and over again.”

Ferdinand then started giving instructions to Hartmut. It seemed that to solve any upcoming problems, they had fiddled with my notes to make them look more like research results.

They started off as random notes I made while transcribing and comparing copies of the bible. I can’t believe they’re now fit to be presented at the Interduchy Tournament. I guess that’s a mad scientist for you—they live in a whole nother world.

“May I see them?” I asked.

The research was on prayers that even a blue priest could see, and it covered Water, Fire, Wind, and Earth. Apparently, the ideal timing to present this was next year, when I started the scholar course, but since we couldn’t exactly show the High Bishop’s bible at the Interduchy Tournament, he had selected the safest bits from the transcription.

“Still, who will we attribute this research to?” I asked. “I understand that I’m the most natural pick, as I was raised in the temple. Your average noble never enters the temple and wouldn’t have much opportunity to even see a transcribed bible.”

“Hartmut, of course,” Ferdinand replied. “His extensive research into the legends surrounding the Saint of Ehrenfest will prove most useful, and if we claim that he only started it after becoming your retainer, it will explain the relative simplicity and crudeness of the results.”

Apparently, the quality and quantity were too lacking for the documents to be put forward as the main research of a graduating student. However, since Hartmut had already prepared some other

research, it could simply be added on to a supplementary degree. The only problem was that he would end up being viewed as a weirdo who frequently visited the temple for some reason.

“But that will not change much for me, as I am already known for being a Lady Rozemyne devotee,” Hartmut said, delivering this unpleasant news with an uncomfortably pleasant smile.

“Um, when did you become known for that?!” I asked.

“During your long sleep, Lady Rozemyne.”

It seemed that after my accidental blessing while playing the harpsiel at my debut, Hartmut had promptly begun spreading legends of my sainthood at the Royal Academy. These grand tales were founded in the explanation that Sylvester had given for nobles to understand.

Okay, that explains why Prince Anastasius was suspicious about me when we first met!

“But you weren’t my retainer at that point, were you?” I asked.

“My mother scolded me for taking things too far and told me to calm down—to think carefully before acting. I ended up having to wait another year, but by that point, I was already your retainer at heart.”

Guh... That’s pretty similar to what Roderick said about becoming my vassal way before becoming my retainer, but why does it sound so different?! Otilie, I don’t think your son is ever going to calm down!

After Ferdinand finished instructing the apprentice scholars on the Interduchy Tournament, he gathered the archduke candidates and their retainers. Now, there was going to be a meeting about my upcoming tea party.

I’d much rather be reading in my room, but I guess that isn’t an option. Tch.

Rihyarda was striving to get me out of my room to live a normal noble life, while Brunhilde was overjoyed to finally have an opportunity to spread trends alongside me, so I was having to attend at least the bare minimum number of tea parties.

“But aren’t Ehrenfest books a hot topic right now?” I asked. “I’m still not confident in my ability to stay conscious, so I’d rather attend as few tea parties as possible.”

In response to my very reasonable point, Ferdinand presented me with a necklace embedded with several surprisingly large feystones. “Wear this when attending tea parties,” he said, “and take your leave when these feystones are half dyed. The other duchies already know that you are sickly and collapse without warning. If you say that you feel unwell and are on the verge of passing out, any host should permit you to depart.”

Letting me leave early was a lot better for the others than having

to endure the trauma of me collapsing in front of them. Furthermore, according to Ferdinand, the color-changing feystones would make it easier for my attendants to evaluate my health. The mana in the feystones wouldn't even be wasted, since we could repurpose it for Spring Prayer and the Dedication Ritual.

Gee whiz, I sure am feeling like a battery charger.

"However, if you leave midway through, you will need someone there who can follow up without fail," Ferdinand continued. "For that reason, only attend tea parties where Charlotte is also present. No others."

"Uncle, that would put too great of a burden on Charlotte," Wilfried said, evidently not keen on the idea. "She only recently started attending the Royal Academy and is not yet used to socializing. Instead, should we not have Rozemyne abstain from tea parties entirely until Charlotte can develop more experience?"

I could do nothing but hang my head. The tea party in the library was one thing, but I didn't want to force other tea parties if doing so meant putting a burden on Charlotte.

This is why I'm saying I want to stay in my room and read. Let me be weak in peace.

I sighed, overcome with gloom, at the same time as Ferdinand gave his own exasperated sigh and glared down at Wilfried with frosty eyes. "As always, you think only of what is in front of you and never of the future," he said.

"What?!"

"If we do not use this time to get Rozemyne as much socializing experience in the Royal Academy as possible, will you not suffer more than anyone? You will need to attend the Archduke Conference as Aub Ehrenfest one day, and at this rate, you will need to bring a first wife who is incapable of socializing. Charlotte will not be there for you to rely on then. I appreciate that you care for your younger sister, but if you are going to be the next archduke, you must always consider the full picture. You should drop to your knees and plead for Charlotte's help, if necessary."

Now, it was time for Wilfried to hang his head.

"Charlotte, I believe you are especially mature and thoughtful for your age, perhaps because you were raised beneath two highly unreliable older siblings," Ferdinand continued. "I understand that this will place a heavy burden on you, but please accompany Rozemyne to any tea parties."

"I would find it more of a struggle to invent new trends and introduce new industries to the duchy as my sister does, so I will do what I can, where I can," Charlotte said, wearing a dazzling smile that seemed to exude ambition.

Noble tea parties were replete with indirect language, with all parties probing each other as deeply as they could. Under normal circumstances, as Charlotte's older siblings, we would accompany her to tea parties and protect her while she gained experience. Yet here I was, being the burden despite being her elder.

Doesn't this make me a failure of an older sister?

The thought alone was depressing. I wanted to be a reliable older sister like Tuuli, who always came up with new designs in advance and was so thoughtful that she had even predicted that I would want more armbands. But no matter how much I tried, it seemed as though that could never be me.

"I would rather not inconvenience Charlotte like this," I said, "so please allow me to stay in my room and spend my days reading."

"Yes, that would minimize problems for now," Ferdinand replied, "but did I not just explain how that will introduce more issues in the future? Are you even listening? You have no choice but to attend while planning ahead."

All of a sudden, Rihyarda protectively stepped between us. "I should ask if *you* are even listening, my boy! How many times have I warned you about this? You always resort to using harsh language, and I always tell you to think more carefully before you speak. You are coming across as much too cruel. Have you not been heeding my advice whatsoever?"

Ferdinand offered no response. Instead, he merely looked down at the floor.

Upon seeing this, Rihyarda let her expression soften. "Ferdinand, my boy... I know that you are doing all you can for Lady Rozemyne, making magic tools and thinking of plans for her, but the way you speak is much too harsh for a girl who cannot even enjoy talking about what she loves with her friends during tea parties," she continued and then glared at Wilfried. "And I could say the same to you, Wilfried, my boy. I understand that it isn't easy for you to continually run around cleaning up after milady's messes, but she does not collapse by choice. It is only natural that she would get excited when topics she enjoys are brought up. Imagine if you were told to suppress your happiness at all times, even when you win one of those gewinnen games you are so invested in. And imagine that, upon failing to suppress your emotions, you were told to stop playing entirely."

Wilfried gave me a timid look. "Sorry, Rozemyne. I didn't realize I was being so inconsiderate. Charlotte's here this year, and I don't need to attend tea parties for girls now, so I thought it would be better to have her deal with them instead."

I nodded. Even putting aside any potential malice or what have

you, it was a fact that Ehrenfest would be much more peaceful without me attending tea parties.

“Rihyarda, would it not be in everyone’s best interest for me to stay locked inside my room?” I asked.

“Please don’t feel so down, milady. We attendants are at fault when we cannot plan ahead and ensure that you may enjoy tea parties to the very end.”

Rihyarda’s words brought me back to reality. My brow had been furrowed in thought as I tried to come up with an excuse to stay in my room, but on the outside, I must have looked sad about not being able to attend tea parties.

“I was not feeling down,” I replied. “I understand all too well that you are always working hard and considering every avenue you can.”

“In that case, milady, please give us more opportunities,” Rihyarda said, sounding dead serious. “We have no choice but to gain experience of our own—to work on identifying when your mana begins to overflow, how much overflow is safe, and what we can avoid to ensure that the tea party concludes safely. You have fallen unconscious during two tea parties now, so I understand your hesitation to try more. However, we cannot grow if we are not given the chance. Even during the library tea party, when the discussion turned to exchanging books and your thoughts on them, we kept you stable by using feystones. Will you not try attending more tea parties with this necklace Ferdinand so generously prepared for you?”

My heart was moved a little. Indeed, even during the bookworm tea party, things had been going pretty well until the palace library was brought up. I was certainly open to the idea of attending another, as long as I wasn’t forbidden from talking about books.

After all, I’m still interested in hearing stories from other duchies and what people think about books in general.

As if noticing this chink in my armor, Charlotte clasped my hands and gazed at me, her indigo eyes brimming with concern. “Sister, I have been looking forward to attending tea parties with you ever so much. To me, your return from Ehrenfest was cause for celebration, and my hope is that we can attend your next tea party together.”

That’s so adorable! As a big sister, how can I not go to a tea party with her now?!

“Very well. We may attend the next one together,” I said and exchanged a smile with Charlotte.

“In that case,” Ferdinand interjected, “I suggest you plan a tea party with Dunkelfelger.”

“Dunkelfelger?” I repeated.

“You are closer to their archduke candidate than any other, no? Lady Hannelore. You have exchanged books with her, she can keep up

with your interests, and she has witnessed you collapse at tea parties more than once before. It should be safe for you to make a few minor mistakes in her presence.”

Wilfried abruptly stood, his expression hard. “You misunderstand Lady Hannelore, Uncle. She is not at all used to Rozemyne collapsing. Even last time, she was so shocked that she—”

“She is a woman of Dunkelfelger,” Ferdinand replied, waving his hand dismissively. “We may intend to exploit this for our benefit, but we can say with certainty that she has what it takes to do the same.”

Hannelore didn’t come across as the scheming sort to me, but history showed that Dunkelfelger women were quite capable strategists, so perhaps her demure conduct was all a farce.

After listing off several more instructions, Ferdinand returned to Ehrenfest with his retinue. The apprentice scholars were extremely busy with their suddenly increased workload, but Hartmut seemed particularly lively, and Philine was desperate to learn as much as she could. Add on Roderick to that, and they looked as though they were having plenty of fun.

We consulted Dunkelfelger about a tea party and received a positive response. They had ended up being the ones to invite us, since they wanted to discuss my modern translation of their history book.

I’ll do my best so that they permit me to print it, and so that I can ask to borrow the book I currently have for a little while longer!

After putting on the necklace that Ferdinand gave me and making sure we had our Ahrensbach knight stories, which we had printed in the temple workshop after Aurelia shared them, I made my way to the Dunkelfelger tea party with Charlotte.

Dunkelfelger’s tea party room was very simplistic: the color scheme was a simple combination of blue and white, and there were no ornate carvings or fancy decorations. The main table was long with sharp edges, and in the corner was a statue of a highbeast with a knight atop it, about as big as a small child. It was made of clear blue crystal and was carved so beautifully that I almost expected it to spring to life at any moment.

Mm... It’s simple and modern, but stylish in a way that seems distinct from Klassenberg fashion. Although, I must admit, contemporary designs like this feel a bit unusual, since Dunkelfelger has such a rich history to draw from.

As I curiously looked over the room, Hannelore blushed with embarrassment. “Plain, isn’t it? Our duchy places very little focus on decoration, and when coupled with our color being blue and the season being so frigid...” She trailed off and muttered about how the

atmosphere and decor felt especially cold in the winter—a stark contrast to the summer, when knights filled the room with pleasant uproar.

“I would argue that it reflects Dunkelfelger’s practicality in quite a charming and efficient way,” I said. “It may not exude the adorableness that girls tend to love, but a gathering of knights would feel right at home here. The decoration positively exudes strength, meaning it suits your duchy very well indeed.”

Hannelore blinked in surprise, looked around the room, then nodded several times. A seat was suggested to me, at which point Hannelore took a demonstrative sip of tea and then bit into a sweet. In turn, I ate one of the Ehrenfest cookies we had brought with us.

Once these opening formalities were over, I tried the sweets that Hannelore recommended to me. One seemed to resemble dried grapes covered in honey-flavored yogurt.

“Is this a Dunkelfelger specialty?” I asked.

“Indeed. These fruits are called rohres. I prefer them dried, although adults tend to enjoy them more when they’ve been turned into vize. We generally serve sugared rohres when in the Sovereignty and Royal Academy, but given your duchy’s pound cakes and cookies, we thought you might prefer these.”

I was glad to know that Hannelore had considered my preferences when choosing these sweets and nodded with a smile. “Yes, these dried rohres are quite delicious. I’ve developed quite a taste for them. I think they could serve as the perfect complement to any pastry.”

“Sister,” Charlotte added, “I believe they could be used to make a wonderful pound cake.”

“Oh my. Rohres in pound cake? That sounds delicious,” Hannelore said with a dreamy smile. I nodded my agreement, and she instructed her attendants to gift me with some dried rohres once our tea party was over. “Please do share your new creations with us when they are done.”

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

You’ve got a new task coming up soon, Ella.

“Now, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said, “about your modern translation of our duchy’s history...”

“Have I committed some grave error?” I asked.

“Oh, not at all. It was extremely well written. My brother even read it several times over. He was, *ahem*, quite inebriated on the splendor of our history, so...”

I only knew Lestilaut as an antagonistic jock, so it was extremely surprising to learn that he was an avid enough reader to go through the same manuscript several times. Even if this passion was inspired mainly by his patriotism for his duchy, I was pleased to see how much

enjoyment he had gotten out of reading.

That's one affection point for you, Lestilaut!

"In any case, the aub requested that we be allowed to transcribe the book for our own purposes as well," Hannelore continued. "Erm, what do you think? The details can be discussed during the Interduchy Tournament or perhaps during the Archduke Conference."

I opened my mouth, ready to agree here and now, but Charlotte spoke first. "We shall discuss this with our aub as well," she said with a smile. "I believe it would be ideal for them to settle the matter between themselves at the Interduchy Tournament."

"I thank you ever so much."

Oh. I guess I wasn't supposed to give her my approval right away. Well, I didn't even get a chance to speak, so I'm still safe.

From there, the conversation shifted to us sharing our thoughts on *Royal Academy Love Stories*. Hannelore had much to say: she thought it was wonderful, she wanted a man like this one particular character to offer her a feystone, and she liked a selection of the stories in particular. The most surprising thing was that her favorite story was the one about Sylvester and Florencia.

"To begin with, one cannot help but support a man chasing after a woman who is both older than him and from a higher-ranked duchy," she said. "I can only dream of someone one day speaking their love to me with such passion."

Ouch. Hannelore's head over heels for Sylvester, of all people. That's unexpected.

Charlotte listened with a vaguely uncomfortable smile, aware that the story was about her parents getting together, and then said, "I personally enjoyed this one about the apprentice knight. Not many men would stay so resilient after failing so many times, nor would they continue striving with such fervor to earn the hand of their one true love."

This time, Hannelore was the one wearing an uncomfortable smile. It was probably a Dunkelfelger story, and perhaps she knew whom it was based on.

Although, in this one, they keep losing all the way to the end.

"Incidentally, I am ever so glad that I was allowed to lend Ehrenfest books to others," Hannelore said, bringing up the book lending. "I am now able to discuss them with my other friends as well."

"Do read this story as well, then," I said, leaping on the new subject at once. "It is a tale about knights, taught to me by an Ahrensbach woman who wed into Ehrenfest. I brought it with me in the hope that we could extend our exchange. You returned my book, Lady Hannelore, but I am sad to say that I have not yet finished

transcribing the book I borrowed from you.”

Philine offered our new book to one of Hannelore’s apprentice scholars, who looked to their lady for a response. Hannelore gave a curt nod, then turned to me and said, “You really need not be so considerate, Lady Rozemyne, but I will gratefully accept.”

Okay, so I can keep borrowing the book. Yippee!

As I made a victory pose on the inside, Rihyarda lightly rested a hand on my shoulder. I gazed down at my necklace and saw that the feystone Ferdinand had indicated was half dyed, meaning it was time for me to leave.

Drat. And I still feel fine too.

As I dwelled on how little I wanted to leave, Charlotte likewise noticed how much the necklace had changed color. She rested a hand on her cheek, her indigo eyes trembling with concern, and said, “You appear rather pale, Sister. Are you well?”

“Lady Hannelore, my sincerest apologies, but I believe I must leave for today...” I said, placing a hand on my necklace while making no attempt to hide my disappointment. “I, erm, would not want to collapse and trouble you once again.”

Hannelore’s expression clouded with worry. “But of course. I would not want you to push yourself for my sake. I pray that you rest well and feel better soon.”

“Today has been truly delightful,” I said. “Please share your thoughts on the books with me again sometime. Charlotte, I leave the rest to you.”

“Indeed, Sister,” Charlotte replied. “You may count on me.”

I said my farewells, stood up, and then returned to the dormitory, leaving the rest to Charlotte. I made it all the way back to my room without collapsing and sighed in relief. My retainers did the same, although they seemed even more relieved than I was.

“To think Lady Rozemyne could discuss books without collapsing immediately afterward...” Lieseleta mused.

“Indeed,” Rihyarda said with a proud grin. “She attended a tea party with her closest friend and came out unscathed. The meeting with Drewanchel should continue just fine, milady.”

I’m glad the two of you are so happy for me, but the tea party depresses me for another reason entirely...

The Tea Party with Drewanchel

“It’s splendid...” Brunhilde said with a sigh of wonder as she gazed into the wooden box. Inside was the hairpin from Ehrenfest, decorated with pure-white flowers that would make Adolphine’s wavy, wine-red hair stand out all the more beautifully. The flowers were made with lace and looked very much like large roses, and the softly colored green leaves that surrounded them brought images of spring to mind. The thread used seemed to be especially glossy, perhaps because Tuuli had prepared it and the design well ahead of time, and that wasn’t all—the decorations had been adorned with tiny, glass-like beads, making it look entirely like the flowers were wet with morning dew.

Tuuli sure is amazing...

“Is this of an appropriate quality for Prince Sigiswald to give to Lady Adolphine?” I asked.

Brunhilde nodded, her amber eyes tearful and dreamy. “Oh yes—it is more beautiful than I can put into words. I see your personal hairpin craftswoman has become even more talented.” She had the keenest eye for quality out of all my retainers and tended to set very high standards, so earning her praise was a genuine achievement. I was beyond pleased that Tuuli was being recognized for her skill.

“In that case,” I said, “please make arrangements with Charlotte’s attendants and contact Drewanchel.”

“As you wish.”

We probed Drewanchel about a tea party, and they invited us to one they were planning to hold soon. We didn’t have any plans ourselves, and participating was much less of a hassle than hosting, so Charlotte and I both agreed. The moment we received the formal invitation, however, we realized just how big of a mistake we had made.

“So,” Charlotte said, “now we have to attend this...”

“And I suppose it’s too late for us to drop out,” I added.

We shouldn’t have been lazy and taken the easier option! We should have hosted the tea party ourselves!

But it was too late for regrets. We had already expressed our interest, and now that we had a formal invitation from a greater duchy, we could hardly refuse to participate.

To think... We’ve been invited to a tea party meant exclusively for top-ranking duchies!

Now that her engagement to the first prince was formalized, Adolphine was holding a tea party to gather together the central pillars supporting Yurgenschmidt—the top-ranking duchies. Expected to attend were an archnoble from Klassenberg, Hannelore from Dunkelfelger, Adolphine’s half-sister, a fellow archduke candidate from Gilessenmeyer, a fourth-year archduke candidate from Hauchletzte, and finally, Detlinde from Ahrensbach. All of the duchies from ranks one to six were lined up, and none below that were invited... except, of course, Ehrenfest the Tenth.

In case it wasn't clear already, this tea party isn't meant for us! We're completely out of our depth here! Part of me wishes I could pass out partway through just as an excuse to leave sooner, but with how serious and scary things are going to be, that isn't even an option!

Things rarely panned out as one wanted them to, and there was no way I could abandon Charlotte and force her to attend alone. I needed to steel my resolve and go alongside her.

“But if you think about it,” I said, “this might actually work in our favor.”

“How so?” Charlotte asked, tilting her head. We were going to be attending this tea party whether we wanted to or not, so we had nothing to lose by focusing on the bright side.

“Had we been attending a tea party with Drewanchel alone, we can assume they would have broached any number of uncomfortably personal topics or pushed unreasonable demands on us. In a tea party with so many participants, however, the conversations will trend toward more innocuous subjects. In that sense, this is actually quite convenient for us.”

In short, we could complete our primary mission of delivering the hairpin and then spend the remainder of the tea party talking about things that were completely inoffensive.

I paused for a moment in thought and then looked up. “We should bring some of our new sweets to the tea party with us, such that we can bring up topics of our own.”

“Are you thinking of any sweets in particular?”

“Mille crepes,” I said, recalling the cakes made by stacking lightly baked crepes and slathering cream between the layers. We were going to be dealing with top-ranking duchies with presumably gourmet palates, so a lighter dish seemed more appropriate than something like galettes made with buckwheat. They were time-consuming to make, but the layers of cream and pastry looked divine, and the level of sweetness could be adjusted to one’s taste.

Just like with our pound cakes, we had powdered sugar, cream, honey, jam, and rumtopf as available toppings, allowing for an extra touch of sweetness. The powdered sugar was a little bit too grainy to

be ideal, but when sifted on top of the crepes using a tea strainer, it formed what looked like falling snow. It made for a beautiful sight.

The day of the tea party had finally arrived, and after much hard work, Ella had made the mille crepes we needed. I was very much used to the dish, having eaten it surprisingly often while Ella tried to master the recipe, but Charlotte had only tried it on a few occasions. Making one took a long time, and making them in bulk was even more arduous, so they were served only on occasion.

We prepared the sweets and the hairpin, among other things, and since my intention was to acquire some love stories during the tea party, I made sure to have several apprentice scholars accompany us.

“We thank you ever so much for inviting us.”

“Oh my. Lady Rozemyne, Lady Charlotte, I am quite glad to see you’ve come,” Adolphine said, welcoming us with a smile.

To say the Drewanchel tea party room gave off very natural vibes was an understatement—wainscoting was on all the walls, and there was cloth strung up depicting flowers and trees. There were also potted plants here and there, though at a glance, I couldn’t tell whether they were purely decorative or actually useful herbs.

“The air in here is so refreshingly pastoral,” I said. “It feels so serene, like standing in a forest.”

“Oh my.” Adolphine brought a hand to her mouth and gave a refined giggle. “Perhaps through eating here, Lady Rozemyne, it can feel as if you are having a picnic in the forest despite your poor health.”

After we had exchanged our lengthy noble greetings, I was taken to my chair. Charlotte was seated to my right, and Hannelore directly in front of me. Detlinde was sitting rather far away, perhaps because of our tea party last year.

“Good day, Lady Hannelore,” I said.

“Good day,” she replied, returning the greeting with a smile. “I was quite surprised to learn of your invitation to this tea party, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I have brought a hairpin for Prince Sigiswald to present to Lady Adolphine. It will surely be debuted at this very tea party.”

“Is that so? I can’t wait. Lady Eglantine’s hairpin last year was something to behold.”

After a brief conversation with Hannelore, Charlotte introduced me to the archduke candidate sitting next to her. “Sister, this is Lady Luzinde of Gilessenmeyer,” she said.

Luzinde was a first-year archduke candidate and a very good friend of Charlotte’s, it seemed. She was also one of many who had read *Royal Academy Love Stories* at Hannelore’s recommendation. Her

light-green hair swayed gently as she turned to face me. "Lady Rozemyne, this is our first time having a tea party together like this. I added a personal family symbol to my schtappe after Lady Charlotte suggested them, and she tells me that you are the one who came up with the idea. She said she is proud to have you as her older sister."

Her words echoed in my mind; hearing "proud" and "older sister" together in the same sentence made for a pleasant hum in my head as they repeated over and over. I had considered myself deadweight ever since my arrival at the Royal Academy, but here Charlotte was, singing my praises to her friends.

I'm so happy right now, I could actually die! Aah... I really have to calm down, though. At this rate, I'll need to leave before the tea party even begins. But I can't help but smile!

"To me, Charlotte is much more impressive," I said. "She is so kind and adorable; I am similarly proud to have her as my little sister." It was my attempt to outdo Charlotte's own kind words, but she stopped me with a firm tug on my sleeve.

"I see you two are very close," Luzinde said with a giggle. "It was Lady Hannelore who introduced me to Ehrenfest books, and I have had a wonderful time reading the ones Lady Charlotte allowed me to borrow. I realize this may be somewhat late, but I have brought with me a book to lend in return."

"We thank you."

An apprentice scholar serving Luzinde then proffered a book, which Philine and Marianne readily accepted. My excitement swelled at the prospect of getting to read a book from Gilessenmeyer.

Calm down. Caaalm down. The tea party's barely even started.

Once everyone was gathered, the tea party could properly begin. As the host, Adolphine took demonstrative bites of each type of sweet, introducing them in the process, and drank some tea. After that, it was my task to introduce the Ehrenfest sweets we had brought.

"These are known as mille crepes," I said. "They are rarely served, even in Ehrenfest, but I thought they would make an ideal treat for this high-class tea party of top-ranking duchies. You may add jam, honey, sugar, and such to taste, as you would with pound cake." Once my explanation was done, I signaled for Lieseleta to start dusting the crepes with sugar. She gently shook a tea strainer, and the white powder floated down majestically like snow.

Charlotte seemed to have done her best to spread word of our pound cakes, and everyone here seemed well accustomed to the idea of sweets that one could adorn freely. The attendants wasted no time in serving their ladies and adding toppings according to their instructions. Just as expected, the top-ranking duchies preferred their sweets on the stronger side, and many asked for honey.

“Are these thin layers of pastry separated with cream?” Hannelore asked. “From the side, the layers are very visible and pretty.”

“I see...” mused Luzinde. “Ehrenfest has unusual sweets other than pound cake. I must say, I think these crepes are even more delicious.”

Our mille crepes were being well received, it seemed. I thanked everyone for their praise and then broached the topic of what specialties were served in other duchies. I wanted more delicious ingredients, if possible.

“I am aware that sweets made with sugar are popular in the Sovereignty, but do any of your duchies have special sweets or fruit?” I asked. “I wish to learn more about popular confectionaries.”

From there, we discussed many fruits that were used to make sweets, how they were eaten, and various other details, until it became clear that duchies had way more specialty foods than I could have anticipated. It seemed that students would serve sweets that were popular in the Sovereignty during Royal Academy tea parties, but upon returning home, they would eat the more local sweets that they preferred.

“I would very much like to try everyone’s local sweets one day,” I continued. “I feel there are many exciting discoveries waiting among them.”

“What a splendid idea, Lady Rozemyne,” Adolphine replied. “Is that how you discovered these new recipes and your new paper, I wonder?”

I nodded with a smile. “New information can inspire fantastic creations. Lady Hannelore recently introduced me to rohres, for example, which I should be able to incorporate into a new kind of pound cake.”

“My my. A new kind of pound cake? At this rate, I expect you will soon have a new kind of rinsham as well. I certainly hope it is this year that Drewanchel finally secures a trade deal with Ehrenfest. Through experimentation, we have managed to pick apart rinsham and devise a type of our own, but it seems to be less effective than yours...” Adolphine said and placed a troubled hand on her cheek. As it turned out, their version succeeded in making hair glossy, but it wasn’t kind on the scalp. I deduced one possible explanation instantly.

I wonder... Are they messing up the scrub?

Hearing that Drewanchel had yet to flawlessly recreate our rinsham came as a massive relief. Perhaps I had been too on guard against them.

“Ehrenfest has many unusual things,” Adolphine continued. “The rinsham appeared simple when deconstructed, but we could not reproduce it perfectly, and the paper that you use to distinguish between merchants is unlike anything we have ever seen before. I am

simply dying to know what other secrets you have up your sleeve. Even my little brother Ortwin has been bemoaning his failure to unearth whatever explanation there is for your duchy's rising grades."

Well, it makes sense that he's struggling. Wilfried can't exactly admit that everyone's working hard to win recipes for my sweets.

Our keeping secrets had apparently made Adolphine very curious, and she was now probing into how many new business partners we intended to take during the upcoming Archduke Conference.

"As you know, Ehrenfest has long been among the bottom-ranked duchies and does not have the capacity to accommodate too many merchants at once," I said with a smile. "I personally believe that our expansion to new trade partners will remain gradual, but as this matter is down to the aub, I can say nothing with certainty."

I was, in essence, telling her not to get her hopes up, and now that our topic of conversation had turned to business, I decided it was the perfect time to focus on what was the very reason for our attending.

"At the moment, Lady Adolphine, I cannot say whether we will commence trading with Drewanchel. However, you are already in a position to receive Ehrenfest products, are you not? I have brought with me a gift from Prince Sigiswald," I said and signaled to Brunhilde with my eyes, as we had planned. She responded with a curt nod, then passed the wooden box containing the hairpin to one of Adolphine's attendants. "Prince Sigiswald ordered this to celebrate your coming of age."

The other women attending the tea party all sighed in envy; as expected, receiving a gift from a man had very special connotations. I noticed that Hannelore and Luzinde had especially bright glints in their eyes, as one would expect from such devout readers of *Royal Academy Love Stories*.

"Oh, how wonderful..." Adolphine sighed upon peering into the box her attendants had opened for her. She had yet to actually take out the hairpin, so the others still couldn't see it.

"Might I suggest trying it on?" I said. "I imagine everyone wishes to see it, and your attendants would do well to use this opportunity to learn how it should be worn."

Adolphine agreed, then her attendants began—at Brunhilde's prompting—to style her hair as she intended to wear it for her coming-of-age ceremony. Once that was done, Brunhilde showed them how to put the hairpin on their lady. As predicted, the pure-white flowers stood out wonderfully against the wine red of Adolphine's hair. She exuded a flashy, strong-willed aura, and the accessory really brought out her inner gracefulness.

"How is it?" Adolphine asked, brushing her fingers against the hairpin as if checking where it was.

“It suits you well,” one archduke candidate said. “You look beautiful.”

“Prince Sigiswald must be such a kind and wonderful man to order such a perfect hairpin for you,” another cooed.

Adolphine’s expression softened at everyone’s praise. “Lady Eglantine looked so remarkable last year; I can only hope I do not compare unfavorably,” she said with a teasing smile. The other girls smiled in turn and assured her that she had nothing to worry about, but I could still sense some genuine anxiety coming from her, no doubt over being compared to Eglantine as the prince’s wife.

“Just as Flutrane and Heilschmerz heal in their own ways, Lady Adolphine, you have a unique beauty distinct from Lady Eglantine’s,” I said. “You both possess such magnificent traits, and none are greater than or inferior to the others.” Eglantine was dreamy and soft, while Adolphine was a sharp beauty with a strong will; there was clearly no point in judging them based on the same criteria.

Adolphine’s amber eyes widened, then her shoulders relaxed, and she broke into a laugh. “Lady Eglantine did mention that you always know exactly what a person wants to hear, Lady Rozemyne, but even then, I did not quite expect her words to ring so true.”

Being compared to Lady Eglantine must be rough... I’m glad to see that she’s feeling better, even if only a little.

As we smiled at each other, Detlinde let out a dreamy sigh off to the side. “I have been thinking that I would like such a hairpin for my own graduation ceremony next year. I wonder, what flowers would suit me...?” she mused aloud, touching her brilliant golden locks while looking at Charlotte and me. Unfortunately, selling her a hairpin was out of the question; if we let her overpower us with her familial ties and superior status, the other top-ranking duchies could do the same.

“Should the time come when we begin trade with Ahrensbach, we will take your order at once,” I said, “but as of yet, we cannot violate our agreements and show favoritism to Ahrensbach alone. Lady Adolphine received her hairpin as an order not from Drewanchel, but from royalty.”

“Oh? But are we not cousins?”

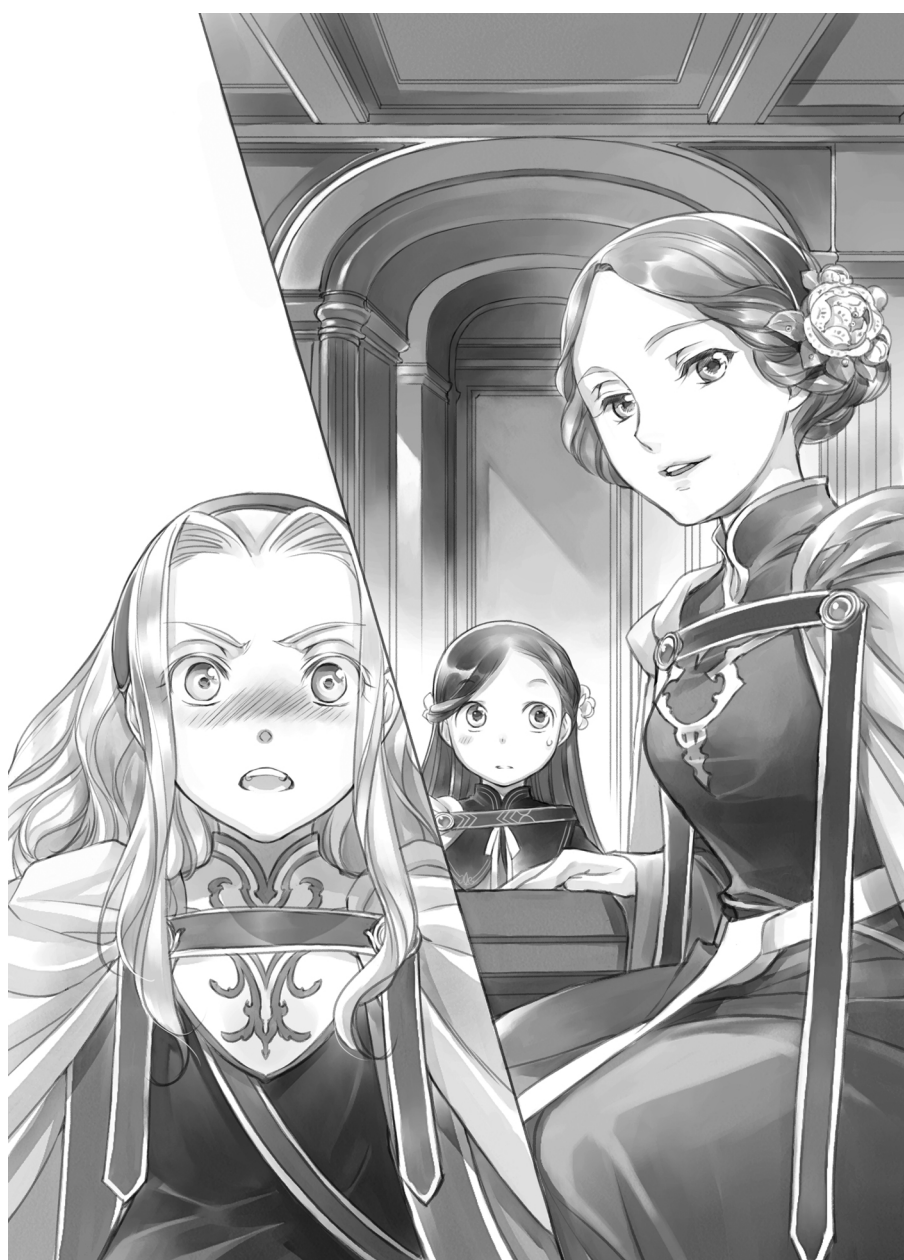
“Our being family has no bearing on trade agreements between archdukes. One needs more than blood to move an aub,” I said with a smile, indirectly saying that she would need to approach Sylvester with something of value first. But even then, Detlinde refused to back down.

“Can nothing be done? It breaks my heart to see this. We are ever so close already...”

Perhaps stubbornness was an Ahrensbach specialty. Her persistence soon brought Fraulärm to mind, and as I started to falter,

Adolphine moved protectively between us, still wearing her hairpin and a smile.

“Now, now, Lady Detlinde. There is no need to be pushy with Lady Rozemyne,” she said. “You need only ask your partner to place the order for you, as mine did.”



Ouch. Talk about brutal. Detlinde hasn't found a partner to escort her yet, Adolphine, and you know that! You're more or less challenging her to find a man from Klassenberg or the Sovereignty. Geez.

In an instant, Detlinde's face turned exceptionally red, and she pursed her lips in a show of frustration. I was waiting to see how she would fire back, feeling so nervous that I started to sweat, when Charlotte suddenly stepped forward and took her by the hand.

"Your graduation is still a year away, Lady Detlinde," she said with a smile. "Perhaps things will be different then. We may not be doing trade with Ahrensbach right now, but new agreements could be made during the Archduke Conference this spring."

"Indeed," Detlinde replied. "Do ask your aub to make more agreements."

And with that, the situation was expertly defused. The atmosphere began to relax once again, and the tea party resumed.

Wowee... Charlotte's something else.

From there, the topic of conversation shifted to Ehrenfest's increasingly popular new books. It seemed that Adolphine was reading the love stories from Haldenzel that Charlotte had allowed her to borrow.

"I am having a splendid time reading them," she said, "but Ortwin tires of reading about nothing but romance. Does Ehrenfest have any books for men, I wonder?"

"We have a collection of knight stories," I replied. "I shall ask Wilfried to lend him a copy."

In return, Adolphine allowed us to borrow a book from Drewanchel. That made two new books from this tea party alone, and that realization made me dangerously thrilled.

Come on, me! Get a grip!

"Pray tell, what stories are there in Ehrenfest books?" came a question. Both Hannelore and Luzinde answered quickly and passionately, while Adolphine spoke of what she had read in the new book she was borrowing. As they began to discuss the romantic moments when gods popped up, it seemed that even those who were unfamiliar with them were able to visualize the scenes and understand exactly how the characters were feeling.

Aah! It's hopeless! I can't empathize with them at all. I mean, why is everyone so moved about spring goddesses popping up during a scene where two lovers gaze into each other's eyes?!

"Another story comes to mind that tells of..." an archduke candidate from another duchy began and then started to regale the others. My apprentice scholars swiftly transcribed all that was said, while I alone stared wistfully at the table, unable to empathize with

anything.

In the end, although everyone was talking about books, I made it all the way through the tea party without collapsing. I simply couldn't relate to the other girls' excitement and passion whatsoever, and the necklace I was wearing changed color only the slightest bit.

Roderick's Name-Swearing

I wrote a report to Ehrenfest about the tea party with Drewanchel, which had been my greatest obstacle. My guardians had told me to write as though I were doing it for a job, so I was working my hardest to do just that, hoping to prove that I was able to do these things when I really put my mind to it.

I put down the date on which the tea party had taken place, a list of who had participated, the sweets people had decided to bring, and what others thought of them. I also made sure to detail every topic of conversation that had come up, things that were likely to be mentioned during the Interduchy Tournament and the Archduke Conference, and potential ways to deal with them.

"That should satisfy Ferdinand," I said when I was finished, rather pleased with the outcome. I looked over the surprisingly thick stack of papers and spun my tired arm, enjoying the gratification of a job well done.

Seeing that my pen was still, Brunhilde came over with a letter in hand and said, "Lady Rozemyne, may I send this to Prince Hildebrand?" I accepted it and read its contents—it was asking how we should go about delivering his armband.

After checking to make sure the letter didn't contain any errors, I gave it back to Brunhilde. "Yes. You may send it."

"Understood. I shall do that now, then."

Once Brunhilde had gone, I asked Lieseleta to send my report to Ehrenfest and then turned to Rihyarda. "Please fetch me our book from Gilessenmeyer," I said to her. "I wish to read now that I have finished my report."

I was sure I had completed everything I needed to do, but Rihyarda refused with a look of exasperation. "Do you not remember that everyone is busy preparing for the Interduchy Tournament, milady? As an archduke candidate, you must observe them and keep abreast of their progress at all times."

"Am I going to be attending this year...?"

"Ferdinand mentioned something to that effect, so unless something quite disastrous happens, I imagine so."

And so, I went to the common room at Rihyarda's firm prompting. These preparations would have seemed meaningless to me under any other circumstances, but since I was actually going to be attending the

tournament this year, I wanted to take in the festive mood.

In the common room, scholars were busy writing clean copies of the stories they had transcribed during the tea party and preparing their research to be presented. The fact that things still seemed a little empty despite that was probably because the knights were all out practicing *ditter*, except for a select few who were staying behind for guard duty. I could see Wilfried and Charlotte by the bookcase with their attendants, talking about something.

“Wilfried, Charlotte, what are you discussing?” I asked.

“Ah, *Rozemyne*.” Wilfried glanced down at me. “We’re talking about the Interduchy Tournament. You want in?”

I nodded and took the seat *Rihyarda* pulled out for me.

“We have three archduke candidates this year,” Wilfried continued, “so we were thinking about dividing the three courses between ourselves and covering one each. What do you think? That’ll make things easier to manage, right?”

I considered the question. If we went down that route, who would be best suited to each course? The answer was obvious.

“Am I right to assume that you’ll cover the knights, I the scholars, and Charlotte the attendants, since she’s gathering experience at tea parties?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t really understand the scholarly research that’s going to be published, and you keep talking about how you’ll be taking the scholar course next year, so I figure you’re better off managing all that.”

“I suppose. We’ve added research on prayers this year, and given the likelihood that Professor Hirschur is going to come, it makes sense that I should oversee things.” Ferdinand had given me several stacks of documents to distract Hirschur with—although whether I’d actually manage to use them effectively was another matter entirely. “I can entrust most of this to my retainer Hartmut, who was an honor student last year and is now in his final year of the scholar course, but what about you, Charlotte? Are you going to manage? Many of our visitors will be from top-ranking duchies.”

“Just like last year, we can have the apprentice knights start helping once they’ve returned from *ditter*,” Wilfried replied, answering in her stead. “Mother and Father are going to be there too, so all in all, things could be worse.”

I was aware that my socializing skills left much to be desired, so if putting that burden on someone else was an option, I was more than willing.

Once we had finished talking about the Interduchy Tournament, my hands immediately strayed to the bookcase—and it was then that I suddenly remembered my promise to let Ortwin borrow an *Ehrenfest*

book.

“Wilfried, please lend a copy of *Knight Stories* to Lord Ortwin, and use this opportunity to begin spreading our duchy’s books among the men as well. For now, we are focusing on our love stories, but we have many knight stories as well, no?”

He nodded in response, but when I added that he should remember to request books in return, he suddenly grimaced. “You’re just saying that because *you* want more books, aren’t you?”

“Of course not. Our books are expensive, so we must ensure that we have something as insurance,” I replied casually. Charlotte noted that she was already doing the same with her friends, at which point Wilfried finally agreed, despite seeming quite unconvinced.

Never forget the importance of a nice-sounding excuse. Ever.

Brunhilde returned while I was reading in the common room, having finished sending the letter to Hildebrand. “Lady Rozemyne, we have received a response from Lord Arthur—the armband is going to be exchanged through retainers,” she said. “May I handle it?”

Last year, we had simply been able to follow Anastasius’s summons and do as he instructed, but Hildebrand was being made to stay in his room to avoid making contact with students. We had been forced to ask him how he wished to receive the armband, and it seemed that our retainers would now be managing the trade.

“That seems best,” I said. “This job might be too great a burden for Lieseleta.” She was but a mednoble, after all.

“You may count on me.”

After our attendants had exchanged several more letters, the armband was finally delivered safely to Hildebrand. Two days after that, I received an ordonnanz of gratitude. There was nothing special about this; here, instead of signing something to receive a package, one sent a verbal message of confirmation.

“Rozemyne, this is Hildebrand,” the ivory bird said in his voice. “The armband arrived.”

To my surprise, the prince’s words of appreciation soon pivoted into complaints. It seemed that he had wanted to receive the armband directly, but coming to see me naturally wasn’t an option, and he couldn’t show favoritism by inviting a lone student to his room.

“I am saddened to know that I can’t go to the library or see Schwartz and Weiss, even after you went out of your way to make me this armband,” the ordonnanz continued. “Still, you finished your classes very quickly, didn’t you? I’m looking forward to the start of next year.”

Soon enough, the bird turned into a yellow feystone. I couldn’t

help but smile; the message had more or less confirmed that Hildebrand intended to wear his matching armband and devote his all to Library Committee work next year.

I tapped the feystone with my schtappe, turning it back into an ivory bird. “I, too, am looking forward to us working together with the Library Committee next year.” I then swung my schtappe, causing the bird to spread its wings, take flight, and soar through the walls as it headed outside.

“Lady Rozemyne! I’ve finished at last!” Roderick exclaimed with a proud smile and a stack of papers in one hand. He had taken his promise to give me a story along with his name very seriously, so I was used to seeing him writing away fervently. Now, however, it seemed that his story was finally complete. My heart pounded with excitement.

“Well done, Roderick.”

“I deserve some praise as well,” Hartmut noted, his eyes narrowed. I chuckled and made sure that his efforts were commended too.

Of course, Roderick had been tasked with more than just writing a story and making a name-swearing feystone; Hartmut had recently started dragging him here and there, since he was due to graduate soon and needed to pass on all the Royal Academy duties appropriate to his status. It must have been hard for Roderick to absorb so much at once, but at the same time, it must have also been a struggle for Hartmut. They had been stuck working together for quite some time.

“It is thanks to your efforts, Hartmut, that Roderick was able to make his name-swearing stone and is going to be capable enough to begin his scholarly work as soon as he becomes my retainer,” I said. “Well done and thank you.”

Hartmut must have been overjoyed to receive my praise, as his expression immediately brightened. He deserved it, of course—Roderick hadn’t known how to make the feystone he required, since an underage student giving their name was almost unheard of, so Hartmut had needed to teach him that too.

“Now then,” I said, “as much as I want to say we should get right to it, I don’t know much about name-swearing. How is it done?” I was unsure whether there was some ritual involved or I just needed to take the feystone, and it seemed that Roderick was in the same boat.

Rihyarda gave a half-smile at neither of us knowing. “Just taking the name-swearing stone would suffice, but you need to prepare too,” she said. Name-swearing was done stealthily and in private between the two involved parties, rather than as part of a large ceremony, and since the feystone involved gave the receiver more or less complete

power over its owner's life, its appearance and where it was intended to be stored were best kept secret. "You will, however, need at least one or two observers present."

There had apparently been cases where someone declared their intention to give another their name, only to attack them when they were alone. For that reason, there needed to be observers present to protect the one receiving the name.

"Ensure that you select people you can trust, milady. Some might even try to steal the name meant for you."

"I don't believe I know anyone who would do something so rotten..."

Rihyarda mentioned that she had observed Justus's name-swearing. It had come after a long period of refusal from Ferdinand, since he had trusted so few people and feared an assassination attempt.

"And who observed Eckhart's name-swearing?" I asked.

"Justus. There was nobody Ferdinand trusted more than that man..." Rihyarda said with a conflicted smile. Much like Roderick, Eckhart had given his name while he was still underage, so both his parents had attended as well.

"So, does that mean Roderick's—"

"They won't be coming, Lady Rozemyne," Roderick said flatly. "You should trust those two less than anyone." I elected not to press for details; his home situation was said to be so bad that Justus thought I would go berserk upon finding out the truth.

"Still, this is problematic," I said. "Who should I choose to observe? Would you be the safest pick, Rihyarda?" She had observed once before and was already familiar with the name-swearing process, so I was sure she could deal with any problems that came up. But as I was nodding to myself, sure that my mind was made up, Hartmut raised a hand. There was an unmissable intensity in his orange eyes.

"Please do select me, Lady Rozemyne."

I don't know... That gleam in your eyes is a little off-putting.

But at the same time, Hartmut had taught Roderick how to make the stone in the first place, and he had done a lot to make this happen. Perhaps he felt like a master watching his student finally grow up, but rather than continuing to speculate, I decided to just ask him what his reason was. He answered immediately and with a casual smile.

"I wish to burn into my memory the precious sight of your first name-swearing."

That's such a dumb reason compared to what I was thinking! He doesn't care about Roderick at all!

"I choose Rihyarda to observe," I said without a moment's hesitation. Hartmut staggered back in shock, then his expression

turned deathly serious as he began contemplating something.

"I suppose I cannot help being refused," he eventually muttered. "If participating as an observer is no longer an option, I suppose I will need to give my name as well to see the ceremony." The scary thing was, I really could imagine him doing it, and allowing him to give his name to me would presumably only end in him becoming even more obsessed than he was already.

"And I choose Hartmut as well," I quickly added. "Please keep a close eye on him, Rihyarda."

"As you wish, milady. We shall prepare the room for us at once."

She, Hartmut, and Roderick went to get everything ready, while I waited in the common room and pouted, annoyed that Hartmut had so easily put me over a barrel. Cornelius spotted me and gave a teasing laugh. "Why not just take Hartmut's name too and order him to start showing some restraint?" he said. "That would make life a lot easier for you."

"I would rather not do something like that," I replied, my cheeks puffed out.

His expression changed to be more serious. "Yes, I know. I imagine that's precisely why Roderick wishes to offer you his name—and why others do too." He shot a meaningful glance toward the children of the former Veronica faction, who were waiting with bated breath to see whether Roderick would be treated any differently once the name-swearing was complete.

"Things can hardly be compared to the past," Cornelius went on. "Those of us attending the Royal Academy aren't fighting over whether you, Lord Wilfried, or Lady Charlotte will become the next aub. Instead, we're all working for mutual gain—our grades are rising, and we're drawing more attention from the other duchies. There's no denying that our status is suddenly on the rise."

This change was even more apparent to the students in the years above—or more precisely, those who had started attending before I reworked the winter playroom.

"Lady Charlotte might one day be married into another duchy, but you and Lord Wilfried are engaged," Cornelius said. "It's clear to everyone that the Ehrenfest of the future will revolve around the two of you."

The question was, which one of us should they follow? And what impact would such a decision have on their relationships with their house and parents? The children of the former Veronica faction were mulling over these questions nonstop.

"If we continue to work and spend time together, attitudes may begin to change," Cornelius continued. "I wish for their futures to be bright as well. We'll need to stay on guard against them, of course, but

I no longer feel that we need to eliminate them completely.”

“Somehow, it sounds like you’ve grown up even more, Cornelius.”

He grimaced. “I wish you would do the same, Lady Rozemyne. Especially when it comes to your obsession with books.”

“I understand completely. I will strive to secure as much reading time as possible, such that my book obsession will only grow stronger.”

“No! That’s the complete opposite of what I meant!” Cornelius shouted, completing our double act just as Rihyarda returned to say that the preparations were all complete.

I went over to and entered the room, leaving my knights to stand guard outside the door. Already inside were Hartmut, who was on my left, and Roderick, who was kneeling in the center.

“Milady, please stand in front of Roderick and wait,” Rihyarda said. I did as instructed, at which point she began shoos everyone else out and shut the door behind me.

Roderick’s brown, almost-orange hair was positioned a bit lower than my eyes, but he was looking up enough that I could see his tense expression and the storm of emotions in his dark-brown eyes. In his hands were the new story he had dedicated so much time and effort to writing and a metal box that most likely contained his name-swearing stone. The box was circular, making it similar in appearance to those used to hold wedding rings, and there was a white feystone attached to the top.

Rihyarda stood next to Hartmut and gave a calming smile. “Now, let’s begin. This shouldn’t be too complicated, and it isn’t a ritual like those for the gods. It’s a personal vow, so you may tell milady your true feelings, Roderick.”

He nodded in response.

After nodding in turn, Rihyarda looked at me. “Once you’ve made sure that Roderick’s name is in the stone and nobody else’s, replace the lid and register your mana. You just need to dye the feystone on the top of the box. Once you’ve done that, nobody else will be able to touch Roderick’s stone.”

I quickly repeated the process in my head, trying to confirm that I understood. *Check the name, close the lid, register my mana. Okay. Got it.*

It was then that Roderick looked up at me, seeking my confirmation. I gave a nod in response, at which point he inhaled slowly and turned to face the floor. He set the pages and the box in front of him, then crossed his arms over his chest.

“I, Roderick, hereby swear to create stories as Lady Rozemyne’s loyal vassal for the rest of my life. As proof of this, I offer my name alongside a story written by my own hand. May my name be with you always. May my life be yours forever.”



Upon finishing his vow, Roderick reached out to the box he had set on the floor and carefully opened it, revealing the stone inside. He then placed it atop the stack of paper, which he took in both hands and raised slowly into the air. Since he was still on his knees, it only reached eye level for me when it was above his head.

I took the box from the stack of paper. Inside was a transparent, oval-shaped stone of a pretty yellow-red gradient, at the very center of which was Roderick's name, written in golden flames. The very sight warmed my heart; it was clear that he had exhausted his mana to make it.

I returned the name-swearing stone to the box, replaced the lid, then began pouring mana into the white feystone, as Rihyarda had suggested. The next thing I knew, Roderick was gasping out in pain. He dropped the stack of papers to the floor and keeled over, clutching at his chest.

“Roderick?!”

My eyes opened wide and I stopped touching the feystone, but Rihyarda quietly urged me to continue while holding back Hartmut. “His name is being bound by another's mana,” she explained. “He's going to experience a great deal of pain, but only until the sealing is complete. Finish this quickly, for his sake.”

“Understood.”

Just as feystones of living fey creatures would resist being dyed, the mana of others would evidently resist being bound. Rihyarda told me not to draw out his suffering for any longer than was necessary, so I poured my mana in all at once.

“Ngaaah!”

Roderick cried out in pain one more time, and an instant later, the white feystone flashed. Lines brimming with white mana streaked across the box, enveloping it like a thin net, and then the box began to change shape. It grew smaller and smaller, all while the webbing continued to spread, until it had formed a perfect cocoon around the name-swearing stone.

Wait. This looks familiar... Ah, that's right—I've seen Ferdinand with some of these.

I seemed to recall seeing his in the cage hanging from his belt, alongside his feystones and potions. I decided to do the same and put the name-swearing stone in the same metal cage as my highbeast feystone. Once that was done, I extended a hand to Roderick, who was lethargically trying to stand, only for him to look up at me and smile.

“I'm fine now, Lady Rozemyne,” he said, wiping the sweat from his brow and exhaling slowly. The pain seemed to have subsided, as he picked up the stack of papers again, held it out to me, and said,

“Please accept this.”

I accepted the papers and started flipping through them.

“It’s a story about an apprentice knight and an apprentice scholar in the Royal Academy who work together to win at treasure-stealing ditter,” Roderick explained. “I tried writing something that wasn’t a knight story or a love story.”

To put it in Earth terms, it was like a young adult story about hot-blooded teens playing sports. I smiled; this was the birth of a new genre in Yurgenschmidt.

“Roderick, I have accepted your name and your story,” I said. “I swear that I’ll strive to be a good lady to you.” And with that, I produced my schtappe and tapped it against his shoulder as he knelt before me, as one would do with a sword to a knight.

Interduchy Tournament (Second Year)

I was overseeing the scholar course while the Interduchy Tournament preparations were being made, but Hartmut was the one actually giving out instructions as a sixth-year archscholar. In the meantime, I was watching him work and taking notes so that I could be useful next year. The way he briskly distributed tasks and checked on others gave me a feeling that he was taking after Ferdinand and Justus, and when I mentioned that to him, he broke into a very pleased smile.

“Last year, Lord Ferdinand and Lord Justus gave me much advice,” he said. “I’m beyond proud that someone who knows them both so well would make such a comparison.”

Preparations went very smoothly thanks to Wilfried, Charlotte, and me overseeing a course each. I could focus on the apprentice scholars without thinking too much about anything else, and it was a valuable learning experience, since I could evaluate my siblings’ retainers and see how skilled they were compared to my own.

In conclusion: my apprentice scholars are in a league of their friggin’ own thanks to Ferdinand whipping them into shape.

Naturally, being skilled meant bearing a heavier burden, but my retainers were still infinitely more useful than Wilfried’s and Charlotte’s. Philine was just a laynoble, for example, so she generally stuck by Hartmut’s side and tried to refrain from standing out too much. Even so, it was clear to see how much she had grown; she easily found tasks that needed to be done just from eyeing her surroundings and managed to blaze through paperwork exceptionally fast.

Roderick, as my new retainer, was watching Philine anxiously; he was still doing his training to become Hartmut’s successor, but he was nowhere near as fast as her. “I’m going to catch up however I can,” he declared, filled with motivation. I gave him a few words of encouragement in turn and said that he was going to be made to catch up either way once he also started working with Ferdinand.

As this was Charlotte’s first year at the Royal Academy, she was paying close attention to the advice she received from her retainers, Brunhilde, and the others. Meanwhile, Wilfried was doing his best to make things up to Charlotte’s and my guard knights, who hadn’t been

able to participate in training or the meeting. Things progressed smoothly, with the only pauses being for the occasional meeting to bring everyone up to speed.

“Now, let us start bringing everything to the venue,” I said. “Follow the procedure we discussed yesterday.”

The day of the Interduchy Tournament had arrived in the blink of an eye. We finished our breakfast early in the morning and then got right to work, with everyone mobilizing at my call.

“How are things going?” I asked Brunhilde.

“They’re going well, Lady Rozemyne. The Othmar Company’s pound cakes have arrived from Ehrenfest, and the kitchen is sending out freshly baked sweets one after another.”

Indeed, the entire dormitory was filled with a deliciously sweet aroma. Charlotte was busy checking over the teacups and directing things being brought in, and it was then that I realized the apprentice knights were nowhere to be seen. I decided to inquire about them, and Cornelius swiftly answered.

“Lord Wilfried is running them through the weaknesses of the feybeasts most likely to appear in the tournament and the best strategies to defeat them. He’s also distributing rejuvenation potions to ensure that everyone is able to recover their mana.”

“Should you not be attending that as well, Cornelius?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine,” he replied with a reassuring grin. “I’ve trained more than enough and have all the information memorized. All I need to do now is attack when instructed.”

“Oh, so this is a romantic brag. You’re saying that you and Leonore are so close now that you can predict her instructions and therefore don’t need to attend the meeting.”

“No! How is that the conclusion you came to?!”

Eeh? But I could totally see the hearts in your eyes.

I went to the venue of the Interduchy Tournament with the scholars, with Cornelius accompanying me as my guard knight and Rihyarda as my attendant. It was held in the largest training arena in the knights’ specialty building—a great structure designed to accommodate flying highbeasts, quite similar in appearance to the arena I had played ditter in last year. Although it was outside and the massive sky above was gray and raining snow, I couldn’t feel the weather at all. It was like the arena was covered with a transparent dome.

Compared to the arena I was familiar with, however, this one was much larger. It was also more elliptical in shape—whereas the other was mostly circular, this one was composed of two circles together. There were audience stands surrounding it, much higher than the

floor of the arena and completely flat, much like the ones from when we had played our game of ditter. Back then, I had thought it strange that the stands weren't positioned on a slant—surely this made it hard for everyone not on the front row to see what was going on—but now I understood that this was actually an area where people would socialize and publish research.

“Lady Rozemyne, Ehrenfest's space is from here to that line,” Cornelius said, indicating the red lines that ran along the ivory floor as we watched the scholars set things up with experienced movements. The walls of each space were decorated with colored cloth matching the capes of whatever duchy was intended to use it.

“I see the top-ranking duchies have the larger, more central spots that are easier to observe from,” I said.

“Now that Ehrenfest has risen to the tenth rank, our spot is much wider and just generally better than the one we received last year. In fact, back when I was a first-year, we were seated over there,” Cornelius said with a wry smile and pointed to a crowded gathering of those from the lesser duchies. One's designated space was based on one's rank, and it seemed that we had received very little room to ourselves when we were a middle duchy ranked among lesser ones. Now, however, we were a far more appropriate rank for our status and had much to be proud of.

Students from other duchies had also started to arrive at the arena, and we could see them setting up too. It truly was a colorful sight, watching the flurry of differently colored capes popping in and out. There were also a ton of ordonnanzes flying about, which was fun. Apparently, people were using them to stay in contact with their dorms.

As I watched the flock of ordonnanzes busily flying about, one burst from the crowd and soared toward me. Cornelius stuck his arm out in front of me, and the bird quickly landed upon it before delivering a message in Liesele's voice.

“Lady Rozemyne, Aub Ehrenfest has arrived. He says that he wishes to meet with you before the tournament. Please return to the dormitory at once,” the bird said three times and then turned back into a feystone. I tapped it with my schtappe and sent back my acknowledgment.

“Hartmut,” I said once the ordonnanz had taken flight again, “the aub has summoned me back to the dormitory. Please help the attendants once you have finished your own preparations.”

“As you wish.”

Returning “at once” was impossible for me by foot, so upon leaving the arena, I got into my highbeast and soared up into the air. The grounds of the Royal Academy were so sprawling that I wasn't

entirely sure where our dormitory was, so I was thankful to have Rihyarda at hand to give me directions.

“Back in my day, it was normal to fly over the grounds thanks to treasure-stealing ditter,” she explained. The dormitory was quite far away from the knight building, so I was glad to have my highbeast. It was much faster than walking to the entrance of the central building, and I didn’t get tired out either.

“Lady Rozemyne, the aub is right this way,” one of Sylvester’s attendants said upon my arrival and guided me to the room he was waiting in. Florencia, Ferdinand, Wilfried, and Charlotte were also in attendance, and my attention was immediately drawn to Ferdinand. Today, he was wearing one of Ehrenfest’s dark-yellow capes over his noble attire.

“This is my first time seeing you wear a cape of our duchy’s color, Ferdinand,” I remarked. “It’s like looking at a new you.”

“That would be because I received this cape only today.”

“Excuse me?”

As it turned out, Ferdinand had tried to attend the tournament wearing his usual blue cape. Sylvester had immediately stopped him upon seeing this and said something to the effect of, “Hold on. Are you really planning to use that cape? People are gonna think you’re from Dunkelfelger. At least wear our duchy’s color, even if only for today.”

“Unfortunately, I do not have an Ehrenfest cape of my own,” Ferdinand had replied. “Your mother snatched away the one Father gave me during my gifting ceremony, saying that a priest has no need for such a garment.”

“You need to tell me these things!”

“Did you not permit me to refrain from speaking of your mother?”

And with that, Ferdinand had acquired a new cape. He was grumbling about how uneasy he felt wearing it, since it lacked all the protective circles he was used to, but he did seem a bit happier than usual to me; he must have been pleased about getting it, despite everything. Besides, it seemed that Justus had still packed the blue cape along with his luggage.

“So, what are we discussing?” I asked.

“I heard from Wilfried that you three divided the courses between yourselves,” Sylvester said, gesturing to my siblings and me.

“That’s right, and it worked. Things progressed very smoothly as a result.”

“That might have worked for the preparation phase, but archduke candidates are supposed to be socializing during the Interduchy Tournament.”

To my surprise, our job was to meet with the archdukes of other

duchies, and all candidates were meant to socialize with one another. I contacted Hartmut by ordonnanz to say that Wilfried, Charlotte, and I would need to start socializing at once, and that I was leaving him in charge of the apprentice scholars. That would probably do the trick.

“Now, about the archduke candidate seats...” Sylvester began. Last year, Wilfried and the archducal couple had simply divided them and dealt with visitors based on their status. This year, however, we were expecting to receive a great deal more attention—especially from the top-ranking duchies. We needed to be able to handle male and female socializing at once, and with that in mind, Sylvester said, “I’m thinking Wilfried and Rozemyne can be one team, and Charlotte and Ferdinand can be another. This should maximize how many people we can speak to at once.”

“Rozemyne and me?” Wilfried asked, sounding a bit worried.

Florencia looked contemplative for a moment and said, “You are engaged now, so putting the two of you together during social events holds much importance. That said, Wilfried... are you confident in being able to socialize with Rozemyne?”

“I...” Wilfried gave me another concerned glance and then looked down at the floor, struggling to find an answer.

“Do be honest here, Wilfried,” Florencia said with a gentle smile. “Success and failure alike will have long-reaching implications here at the Interduchy Tournament.” Indeed, this was different from normal socializing in the Royal Academy, which was done entirely by children. Here, aubs from other duchies would be watching as well.

After some thought, Wilfried offered a response—albeit with some hesitation. “I’ll manage... as long as books don’t get involved.”

“Wilfried,” Charlotte said, “with so many visitors from other duchies here, I imagine such a topic is going to be brought up—and quite frequently, at that. Books are discussed almost nonstop at the tea parties I attend.”

Upon hearing this, Wilfried simply frowned at me. Florencia deduced the general circumstances from his expression, smiled, and said, “In that case, perhaps we should pair Wilfried and Charlotte, and Rozemyne with Lord Ferdinand as her guardian. We want to minimize any potential problems at the Interduchy Tournament, and this seems the safest option to me.”

Nobody disagreed, so our groups were settled. Wilfried seemed relieved that Ferdinand was going to be watching over me as usual, and to be honest, I was too. I felt way safer with him.

“Wilfried, Charlotte, keep reading Rozemyne’s reports for as long as you can. They detail everything you’ll need to know,” Sylvester said as he handed them the reports his scholars had apparently transcribed. My siblings skimmed over them, then looked at me in shock.

“You wrote these, Rozemyne...?” Wilfried asked.

“I was asked to send reports that are more professional than sociable, so I formatted them as I would temple paperwork. So, what did you think, Ferdinand? Flawless work, wouldn’t you say?” I said, my chest puffed out with pride.

Ferdinand allowed himself a short laugh and said, “Yes, you did well.” Sylvester and Karstedt, meanwhile, wore wry smiles.

“Yeah, we can’t complain,” Sylvester added. “These reports are so different from your old ones that I didn’t believe it at first. It’s given me some real insight into why Ferdinand treasures your help in the temple so much. How about you come do some work in the castle too?”

“I don’t have time for any more work,” I replied. “In fact, I’d rather you *reduce* my workload, if anything.”

Our conversation continued until an attendant arrived to fetch the apprentice knights. It was time for them to leave.

“Lady Rozemyne, I ask that you bless the other apprentice knights and me as you did so graciously last year,” Cornelius said. He and the other knights were kneeling before me, with him at the very front. I granted them Angriff’s divine protection and then saw them off.

“Given how far away the knight building is, Rozemyne, I would advise that you leave now,” Ferdinand said. “I shall lead the way.”

“Make sure to look after her for us,” Sylvester added, and with that, we started on our way.

Ditter marked the beginning of the Interduchy Tournament. An archduke candidate from Klassenberg made their proclamation, and the first duchies to play were called forth. It seemed the first half was composed of randomly selected bottom-ranking duchies—and this year, for the first time ever, Ehrenfest was going to play in the second.

“Frenbeltaag the Fifteenth!”

The next duchy was called, and its spot in the audience immediately erupted in cheers as apprentice knights wearing light-blue capes started entering the arena on their highbeasts. They rode around the field and got into their positions as a professor descended to the arena floor—also on a highbeast—and poured mana into a magic circle. There was a sudden flash, and a feybeast burst into existence. It was large, catlike... and very familiar.

“Is that a goltze?” I asked, looking up at Ferdinand.

“No, a siltze. One evolution below. But that matters not. Sit, Rozemyne,” he said with a grimace as the match finally started. Apparently, it was fine to stand when your own duchy was playing, but archduke candidates otherwise had to remain seated.

I can’t see the game from where we’re seated, though. This is kinda

boring...

I pursed my lips, but I dared not complain. This was the start of ditter and the Interduchy Tournament, and visitors had already started to arrive. The nobles who had failed to get pound cake during last year's tournament were coming in droves, determined not to miss out again.

"I received some during the Archduke Conference, but I'm especially eager to try the other flavors," one guest said.

"I've been looking forward to this for several days now," another added.

They're speaking in such a dignified manner, but they have the same overeager glint in their eyes as old women flocking to a bargain sale!

Those who came for sweets were given some and directed to return to their own duchy's space, while those who came for business were sent to Wilfried and Charlotte. The only ones permitted to see Sylvester and Florencia were other archducal couples from the top-ranking duchies.

I was directing my attendants when, all of a sudden, the stream of people approaching us stopped, and those who remained started giving something a wide berth. I was confused at first, but not even a moment later, it all made sense—they had formed a path, and walking down it was the Goddess of Light. Her golden hair, which she was wearing in complex braids, took on an elegant sheen as it caught the light and produced a truly stunning contrast with her red koralie hairpin. She approached us with a calm smile, smoothly greeting those she passed along the way. There was no denying that she looked even more beautiful and mature than I remembered.

"Lady Eglantine!" I exclaimed. "Oh, and Prince Anastasius. I am honored to see you have come."

Ferdinand prodded my thigh, presumably aware that I hadn't even noticed Anastasius at first. We all exchanged the usual noble greetings, but when we moved to guide them to the archducal couple, Anastasius shook his head and instead sat at our table.

"We have words for you first, Rozemyne," he said as Eglantine also took a seat.

Our attendants started preparing tea while I poison-tested our pound cake and cookies—the latter of which we were serving here for the first time—and then offered some to our guests. Anastasius was more interested in the new, and so he reached for the cookies, while Eglantine asked for some familiar pound cake. Her attendants prepared a serving with well-practiced movements.

"Rozemyne, what's this about research into the bible's prayers?" Anastasius asked. "It's being published under someone else's name, but I imagine it's yours."

I glanced over at Ferdinand, who had suggested all this in the first place. It was probably more accurate to say it was his research than mine. He gave Anastasius a slight and very noble-esque smile and said, “We had to shut out the professors when investigating the bible, so we hope this fills in the gaps we left them with.”

“So you’re the mastermind, then. The House of the Gods seemed to be warming up to us, but now, the gap between us has widened, and some among them are awaiting the saint’s prayers instead. What are your thoughts on this?”

“We merely obeyed the summons of the king.”

“We’ll see how long that attitude of yours lasts...” Anastasius said with a snort—a regal one, of course. He and Ferdinand seemed to understand each other perfectly, but I had no idea what was happening. I ignored their discussion and smiled at Eglantine.

“I am pleased to see you, Lady Eglantine.”

“I, too, am pleased. I am told you have produced yet another new trend, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Yes, this is a new kind of pound cake, made with rohres I received from Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger. Will you have a taste?” I asked. We had soaked the dried rohres in liquor before adding them to the mixture. In my opinion, they had turned out really well.

“It’s quite delicious. I must say, with this level of expertise, I am sure you could make pound cakes for each duchy using their local produce. Never have I regretted graduating more than I do now...” Eglantine said. It seemed that she had felt particularly lonesome since her graduation—a feeling that I understood all too well, since I had graduated back on Earth.

I couldn’t go to my favorite library anymore without permission, and just like that, it was like losing a loved one...

“Incidentally,” Eglantine continued, “I am told that Ehrenfest has released an especially entertaining book this year. Are you making books popular, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Yes, that is my goal. The books are made in Ehrenfest, but people from all duchies are enjoying them. Our love stories are the most popular of all. I would have liked for you to enjoy them as well, Lady Eglantine, but I do not have any to hand...”

“Calm yourself...” Ferdinand muttered to me. His sudden warning caused me to sit bolt upright, and upon seeing this, Eglantine let out a giggle.

“And you are Lord Ferdinand, I assume?” she asked and then quietly added, “The one of so many legends...”

I shot Ferdinand a timid glance. He was giving his standard noble smile, but I could sense the fury in his light-golden eyes.

Ah, crap. I forgot about spreading all the legends surrounding him...

“Rumors are often gross exaggerations of the truth,” Ferdinand said. “I cannot suggest trusting them.”

Eglantine nodded, then suddenly gave me a look of concern. “I am unsure how true the rumors about you are, Lady Rozemyne, but... I fear you are being toyed with by the Goddess of Time.”

“Lady Eglantine?”

“Do be careful. Please.”

Anastasius and Eglantine then said they had to go elsewhere and departed. “What did she mean by that?” I wondered aloud, having not really understood the warning.

“I imagine she was speaking in reference to what Prince Anastasius said,” Ferdinand replied. “Did you not hear him?”

“I didn’t really understand what he was saying, so I started tuning him out.”

Ferdinand sighed and passed me a sound-blocking magic tool. Then, once he had confirmed that I was holding it, he said, “The bible comparison has widened the rift that exists between royalty and the Sovereign Temple, and some members of the cloth have started saying that you, the Saint of Ehrenfest, should be called to perform their Starbinding Ceremony in place of the Sovereign High Bishop. Prince Anastasius was clearly asking us what we intended to do.” The way he was talking made the whole turn of events sound extremely important, but he spoke with such a deadpan expression that I couldn’t know for sure.

“Erm... That’s a big deal, right?” I asked.

“In the eyes of royalty, perhaps, but it was the king who gathered us together and allowed for the bibles to be inspected. No matter the consequences, Ehrenfest is not responsible. I assume you’ll get caught in the middle of it whether you like it or not.”

“Hold on... How come you’re so relaxed about this? As my guardian, you’re as involved in this whole situation as I am.”

“There is little point in panicking now. All depends on the king’s words, so there is nothing we can do,” Ferdinand said, casually hand-waving my protests. His impassive look then turned to a grimace. “Instead, focus on dealing with *them*. Given the stack of paper they have with them, they must be your visitors.”

His grimace disappeared as quick as it had come, reverting back to a noble smile. I followed his gaze and saw a squadron of more than thirty blue-capes coming our way. Hannelore was the only one I recognized among them, and she was continually glancing at the exceptionally large man holding a stack of papers beside her. I could only assume he was Aub Dunkelfelger, most likely holding my modern translation of their history book.

Still, their entourage seems much too big to be made up entirely of just

Hannelore's and his retainers...

As I watched them quizzically, I realized that the knight-looking individuals among them were clearly looking at Ferdinand rather than me. It was then that I remembered being told about his many experiences smashing Dunkelfelger to bits back in his student days.

Oh no... Could it be? Is this going to be a huge pain in the neck?!

I looked to Sylvester's table for some assistance, but they were busy talking to a man who I assumed was Aub Drewanchel, based on his cape. I then turned hopefully to Wilfried and Charlotte, but they were surrounded by nobles I didn't recognize and were just as unavailable to help.

"That man with them is Heissshitze," Ferdinand muttered. "How bothersome..."

"Who's that?" I asked, unfamiliar with the name. "A friend of yours?"

"Not a friend; he is the original owner of my blue cape."

Heissshitze had apparently given up his cape as proof of a defeat and then challenged Ferdinand to countless rematches in an attempt to claim it back, making him much, much more of a pain than Rauffen. In the end, Heissshitze had failed to beat Ferdinand even a single time before their graduation, so he had never managed to win back his cape.

"I certainly hope he does not challenge me to another duel..." Ferdinand said just as the Dunkelfelger squadron lined up in front of our table. The man whom I presumed to be their aub stepped forward. He was tall, muscular, and looked extremely strong—a very fitting leader for Dunkelfelger's knights, if you asked me.

"Are you Lady Rozemyne, the archduke candidate who asked Hannelore if she could publish a modern translation of our duchy's history?" he asked.

I nearly jerked and said "Yes, that's me!" without thinking, but thankfully, Ferdinand flicked me on the thigh again before I could actually respond, bringing me back to my senses. It was a close call, to say the least. We were dealing with the aub of a greater duchy here—I needed to remain dignified and polite.

"Indeed. I am Rozemyne. Will you grant your permission, perhaps?" I asked, trying to sound as graceful as possible.

Aub Dunkelfelger grinned. "Sure. If you win. But if we win, we'll take this manuscript for ourselves and publish it in Dunkelfelger."

"Um...?"

"We challenge you to a game of ditter!" he declared, slamming the manuscript down onto our table.

"Father, what are you saying all of a sudden?!" Hannelore cried, but her voice was drowned out by the oohs and aahs of the

surrounding knights. Apparently, dignity and grace weren't important when it came to people from Dunkelfelger—all that mattered was ditter.

I stared up at the aub, my mouth agape. *What should I do...? How am I supposed to respond to something like this?!*

Of course, I wasn't the only one taken aback by what was happening. "Father, does Mother know about this challenge? I'm going to contact her at once," Hannelore said, tears welling in her eyes as she hurriedly took out her ordonnanz. Perhaps this was Aub Dunkelfelger going berserk all on his own.

Ouch. Hannelore sure has it rough... Wait, now's not the time to be thinking about that.

Interduchy Tournament socializing was like a battlefield for archduke candidates, so I needed to deal with this in a manner befitting my status. That said, my court etiquette class certainly hadn't covered what to do when the aub of a top-ranking duchy skipped greetings to challenge you to a ditter match. I also had no clue how to go about dealing with Dunkelfelger.

Oh, right—Ferdinand does, though!

He was said to have a long history with Dunkelfelger knights, so he was surely used to this kind of situation. I gazed up at him, hoping he would jump in to save me in my time of need... but instead, he was avoiding eye contact with the knights entirely, making it painfully clear that he intended to sit back and see how I dealt with the situation.

Ferdinand, you massive idiot... This is the part where you're supposed to help me!

From what I could see, Hannelore was the only one battling Aub Dunkelfelger and showing consideration for my plight. And then it occurred to me—maybe this was a test by our guardians to see how we archduke candidates would react to an unexpected scenario. Even court etiquette class had incorporated plenty of nasty tricks to catch out students. Perhaps the Interduchy Tournament was the same, and visitors deliberately engineered situations like this.

Motivation suddenly welled up within me, and I immediately recalled what Hannelore had said about the translation at the library and during our tea party. Surely there was some solution here that didn't involve accepting the challenge.

I'll pass Aub Dunkelfelger's test and secure the rights to that book!

I straightened my back and smiled at Hannelore. "Was it not said that our aubs need to discuss the history book between themselves? It certainly doesn't seem like a decision that I can make as a mere archduke candidate."

Hannelore was quick on the uptake, as one would expect of an

archduke candidate from a greater duchy. She realized that I was suggesting we leave the baffling matter to the archdukes, returned my smile, and then said, "Indeed, Father! This was supposed to be a discussion between aubs. How else do you expect Lady Rozemyne to react to you suddenly accosting her like this?"

Aub Dunkelfelger merely raised an eyebrow in response, looking amused. Just as expected, it was completely fine for me to avoid the ditter challenge entirely.

"Now, allow me to summon Aub Ehrenfest," I said and went to stand up. But as I was basking in this opportunity to dump everything on Sylvester, Ferdinand rose before me, placed a hand on my shoulder to keep me seated, and eyed the Dunkelfelger knights with a smile.

"No, Rozemyne, there is no need for that," he said. "You wrote the manuscript yourself, did you not? I, on the other hand, have nothing to do with this matter, so *I* shall summon the aub and ask him to take my place." He had closed off my escape route in one swift motion, and with that done, he made his way over to Sylvester, his movements as quick and graceful as flowing water.

Nooo! This isn't fair! Ferdinand just stole my way out!

After a brief groan, I straightened myself out and exchanged greetings with the aub before offering him a seat. At this moment in time, I didn't need to worry about ditter—we were just going to be socializing. Brunhilde immediately brought over a rohre pound cake, so I took a demonstrative bite and recommended that our guests try some, hoping to buy time until Sylvester got here.

"This is pound cake made with the rohres Lady Hannelore gifted me the other day. Please do tell me what you think."

"Oh my..." she said. "I thank you ever so much. I shall do just that."

Hannelore and I sipped tea while talking about specialty dishes; if you asked me, we were model archduke candidates. As it turned out, even Aub Dunkelfelger enjoyed the rohre pound cake—although it seemed that he was more interested in the rumtopf topping than the cake itself.

"This flavor wasn't at the Archduke Conference," he said to me.

"We don't make too much rumtopf, so we had run out by this time last year."

As we continued our talk, Sylvester finally came over, having been sent by Ferdinand. He greeted his fellow aub, sat down, then gave me a look demanding an explanation as he said, "I'm told that Dunkelfelger wants to discuss a modern translation of their history."

I told him about the bookworm tea party and the request Aub Dunkelfelger had just made, at which point he crossed his arms with a frown.

“Give up on the manuscript, Rozemyne,” he said. “There’s no way you can beat Aub Dunkelfelger in a ditler match—you have a hard enough time getting through tea parties without collapsing. Not to mention, although you might not understand this due to your inexperience, Dunkelfelger is simply using this challenge as an excuse to get what they want. Even if you had spent an entire year putting that manuscript together with your retainers, defying a greater duchy simply isn’t an option. Dunkelfelger already has its own version, so I presume yours contains extra notes or some such? As we’re only of the Tenth, we have no choice but to sense the will of greater duchies and obey. I hate to say this, but... You need to let them have it.”

As Sylvester was trying to console me with a kind voice, it was our two visitors from Dunkelfelger who seemed the most surprised. “Oh, no, no,” Hannelore said. “That isn’t right at all.”

“Aub Ehrenfest, that isn’t my intention in the slightest,” Aub Dunkelfelger continued. “I’m asking for a game of ditler, not the manuscript. You’re putting the whole situation in a poor light.”

So he said, but anyone who saw a massive, muscular dude like him challenge a tiny girl to a game of ditler would think he was threatening me. His intentions aside, though—as Sylvester had said, we had given him a clean copy, while the original translation remained with us. Dunkelfelger was evidently fine with publishing it within their own duchy, but perhaps it contained information that they didn’t want other duchies to know. I started to wonder whether I should give up on spreading it through printing and just organize the rough notes into a book that I would enjoy on my own.

Because, I mean, a game of ditler still sounds like a huge pain in the neck.

“Understood.” I nodded at Sylvester and then faced Aub Dunkelfelger again. “If you wish to make that a book in your own duchy, Ehrenfest will consent without protest.”

“No, wait,” he replied. “That isn’t what we want. You put such a tremendous amount of money and effort into this manuscript—what better way to assert your ownership than with a game of ditler?”

And then, realization struck me. The manuscript was a passion project of mine, and the actual translation part hadn’t cost me any money, but if Aub Dunkelfelger understood its value, I wanted him to at least reimburse me the money I had spent on the paper and ink. It had all come from my own budget, after all, so the idea of me surrendering my work without getting anything in return seemed wholly unreasonable.

“You certainly are wise, Aub Dunkelfelger,” I remarked. “As you say, this manuscript cost me a considerable sum of money, since I needed to pay my retainers and such. Might I suggest obtaining it not

through a show of authority, but by purchasing it instead?"

I gazed up at Aub Dunkelfelger, hoping to recoup at least half of my investment, while Sylvester voiced his support of the idea. "Rozemyne made that translation for fun," he said, "meaning she paid for it all out of pocket. It may not be much from the perspective of a greater duchy, but for Rozemyne, it was quite expensive. I humbly ask for your consideration in that regard."

Aub Dunkelfelger looked between Sylvester, the manuscript, and me, frowning so deeply that his eyebrows almost converged over his nose. "She did this for fun...?" he repeated. "Just how much did it cost?"

"Rozemyne. How much?" Sylvester asked.

I took a moment to mentally multiply the cost of a sheet of paper and the number of pages in the manuscript. "I won't be able to provide an exact figure at such short notice," I said, "but if one includes the rough copy and research, the paper and ink alone would cost more than fifteen large golds. Add on the fee I paid my retainers, and I imagine it would come to around eighteen in total."

"E-Eighteen large golds?!" Hannelore exclaimed, blinking rapidly. "Erm, is it normal to spend that much on one's interests?"

It wasn't an amount that a normal archduke candidate could spend lightly, but when it came to books, I spared no expense. I could see Sylvester rubbing his forehead out of the corner of my eye, although I pretended not to notice.

"Ehrenfest's new paper is cheaper than parchment," I explained, "so in truth, it could have ended up even more expensive. My main concerns are whether there were any mistakes in my translation or any events that I misrepresented. I'm quite worried about those manners of mistake, so if you are to tell me the proper translation or the truth of a particular situation, I will deduct an amount from the fee as an information cost."

Aub Dunkelfelger hummed and eyed me carefully. "Why would you spend that much money on a book about Dunkelfelger history to be made in Ehrenfest? It doesn't make sense that you'd put so much time and effort into it."

"Well, is your book not a thing of wonder? As you may have heard from Lord Lestilaut, I was fascinated with the richness of your duchy's history and how far back it goes, so much so that I wish to make it easier to consume and spread it far and wide. It really is a shame that I will never be permitted to do this..." I replied and slumped my shoulders.

An amused grin played on Aub Dunkelfelger's lips. "In that case, let's settle this with a game of ditter. The winner gets to sell the book. I'll return the manuscript as soon as you agree."

My heart stirred. Securing the right to sell this manuscript would give me guidelines for negotiating book rights with other duchies, since I could just say, “These are already the conditions under which we’re doing business with Dunkelfelger.”

“Would these rights extend to any future books we borrow from your duchy and transcribe?” I asked. “If so, we are willing to provide the manuscript, deliver you a copy of each finished title, and pay you a portion of the acquired (royalties).”

Ehrenfest was going to be the one translating and producing the final product, so naturally, we couldn’t pay them *all* the royalties. By offering them a portion, however, it would probably be easier for us to get books from other duchies.

“So, Ehrenfest really does intend to sell the books?” Aub Dunkelfelger asked. No longer was he wearing the same amused grin as when he had proposed the ditler game. Instead, he was giving me a hard, calculating look—the expression of an archduke who had detected we were at a critical point of our negotiations.

I glanced to my side; now was Sylvester’s chance to step in and suavely resolve the issue. He understood my look, sat up straight, and smiled as he said, “We of Ehrenfest intend to make books our primary export. This time next year, the entire country is going to be surprised with what we’ve accomplished.”

The two stared each other down until, eventually, Aub Dunkelfelger grinned. “Interesting. If you win, I’ll grant Ehrenfest the right to sell transcriptions of any book we lend you.”

“That really is a gracious proposal, but we do not have enough manpower to spare for a game of ditler right now. If you insist on there being no other way to resolve this, however, then I at least ask that you make it a personal match.”

Sylvester didn’t want to agree to some crazy, large-scale battle and risk our knights being drained of mana right before they participated in the tournament. Ehrenfest was also in a far more precarious situation than the more populous Dunkelfelger, since we had only recently defeated the Lord of Winter and were low on things like rejuvenation potions as a result.

“In that case, I select Lord Ferdinand as our opponent.”

“I shall speak to him,” Sylvester replied and stood up, spurring the Dunkelfelger knights to roar and cheer. “However, I cannot guarantee that he will agree; Ferdinand is not one to participate in battles he has nothing to gain from. Should he refuse, I will ask for our knight commander to participate instead.” He then lowered his voice to a whisper that only I could make out and said, “If you want us to actually win this, use your silver tongue and convince Ferdinand to fight. Remember—books are on the line here, Rozemyne.”

And with that, Sylvester patted my head and walked away. Ferdinand responded with an extremely blatant grimace when he learned of our current situation, but he quickly masked his true feelings with a smile and returned to us.

“Ferdinand... Can you agree? Please?” I asked, looking up at him with hopeful eyes. I could sense that the Dunkelfelger knights were doing more or less the same.

Ferdinand gave a heavy sigh and sat back in his chair. “Dunkelfelger permitting us to sell their books is worthless unless they continue to lend us new ones, and I can already imagine them challenging us to a game of ditter each time we ask to borrow from them. I can think of nothing more bothersome, and so, I refuse to participate. If you insist on encouraging this farce, Rozemyne, then join the battle yourself, accept defeat, and secure the manuscript, if nothing else. That way, nobody but you will suffer from this nonsense.”

“Grr...” I was similarly convinced that Aub Dunkelfelger wanted to take on Ferdinand in particular, so there was no point in me participating and suffering an immediate loss. “Ferdinand, this game is an essential step to kick-starting Ehrenfest’s printing industry. We cannot afford to lose, nor can we avoid the situation entirely.”

“She’s right!” came a shout from among the Dunkelfelger knights, who were looking as hopeful as ever. “Listen to her!”

“Please, Ferdinand. Lend us your strength,” I said. “Not for me, but for Ehrenfest.”

My hope was to convince him that this was more than just a personal matter—that it was for the sake of our duchy—but he simply put on a noble smile and said, “There is nothing for me to gain from this endeavor, so there is no reason for me to participate.” His tone was frigid, and there was such an intense coldness in his stare that I almost gave up on the spot, but whether or not he participated would surely decide the game. He was far more likely to secure a victory than anyone, and for that reason, I grabbed his sleeve and desperately started pleading with him.

“I’ll give you a copy of every single Dunkelfelger book we transcribe.”

“I do not want them.”

“Then I’ll, um... I’ll...”

As my eyes began to well up with tears, one of the Dunkelfelger knights stepped forward and said, “Aub Dunkelfelger, please entrust this battle with Lord Ferdinand to me.” It was the man Ferdinand had pointed out to me—his former classmate, I assumed.

“Heisshtitze,” the aub replied, “can you get this man of stone onto the battlefield?”

“Yes, sir!” Heissshitze announced. He then looked Ferdinand dead in the eye and said, “One flammerzung fruit.”

Ferdinand was no longer wearing the self-assured smile of a noble; now, he looked purely contemplative as he glared at his returning adversary. Heissshitze grinned as if assured of victory, while his fellow knights patted him on the back and shouted cheers of encouragement.

So this is Heissshitze, huh? Wow! It feels like he’s really used to baiting Ferdinand into fights!

Heissshitze had tried to reclaim his blue cape time and time again, as Ferdinand very begrudgingly recalled... which meant he had succeeded in baiting Ferdinand into ditter matches on countless occasions.

Come on, Heissshitze—this is all for the sake of my publishing rights!

“One quellweide leaf, one winfalke hide...” Heissshitze continued, still maintaining eye contact with Ferdinand. I didn’t recognize any of the names, but I could guess they were highly valuable brewing ingredients. “If you win, Lord Ferdinand, you may take your pick of any—”

“All of them,” Ferdinand interjected. “And some glanzring powder as well. The cape is worth that much, no?” He raised an eyebrow and shot a taunting smile at Heissshitze, whose victorious grin turned into a pensive frown—the look of a man who was putting his life savings on the line, I gathered.

Ferdinand, don’t torture him! You’re being too cruel...

“Well, Heissshitze?” Ferdinand asked.

Heissshitze had no choice. He shot his head up with a look of resolve and said, “It’s a deal. This time, I *will* get my cape back!”

“Very well. As for what we should protect... I suppose we have our archduke candidates here, and conveniently enough, they are of the same age. This will even allow Rozemyne to participate, to some degree, which is valuable as she was the one Aub Dunkelfelger challenged.”

Um... What?

“Fear not, Rozemyne—I shall protect you without fail,” Ferdinand said, wearing a smile so bright that it had to be fake. He was clearly, obviously, *blatantly* scheming... but since there were publishing rights resting on this game, trusting in him was still my best option. No matter what he had planned, I needed to go along with it.

“Ah... U-Um, why does it sound as though I-I’ve been pulled into this too?!” Hannelore stammered.

“You can rest easy, Lady Hannelore. I shall protect you,” Heissshitze said. “Let us defeat Ehrenfest, together. You have already struck down the Saint of Ehrenfest once before, right? Well, I have high hopes for a repeat performance.”

“No. Heisshitze, what are you even saying?!”

Hannelore was getting teary-eyed as everyone started surrounding her, but Dunkelfelger’s knights were too thrilled about the dinner match to show any concern for her panic. On the one hand, I was glad to see Ferdinand so motivated, but on the other... a part of me wanted to cry.

I’m sorry, Hannelore! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to get you wrapped up in one of his nasty schemes!

As I silently pleaded for her forgiveness, Ferdinand and Heisshitze were ironing out the details. They seemed to have this sort of thing down to a science, and they were conveying complex ideas through simple phrases like “As per usual” and “At Dunkelfelger’s training grounds.”

“So, are we going to do this after the graduation ceremony?” I asked.

Ferdinand scoffed. “I want this settled quickly. Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest are both due to participate in the second half of the Interduchy Tournament, so we shall finish things before then.”

It was then that Justus brought over a wooden box presumably containing the blue cape. “Apologies for the wait, Lord Ferdinand,” he said.

“Now, let us be off.”

The Ditter Match

Having agreed to the ditter match, we headed to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory. There were training grounds there, apparently, so that the duchy's students could play whenever they wanted. Just how obsessed were they? It really boggled the mind.

Under normal circumstances, students were only able to enter their own dormitory—but we had Aub Dunkelfelger with us today. We were given feystones containing his mana, which authorized us to go inside with the others.

Upon reaching the training grounds, we divided ourselves into our teams and moved to opposite ends of the field to discuss our game plans. I could see Dunkelfelger's knights form a circle around Heissitze and Hannelore as they started arguing about the best strategies for their representatives to use. I also noticed that Hannelore was clad in feystone armor, which she had evidently put on at some point. Only guard knights wore armor in the Royal Academy, so I never carried my armor feystone around with me as I did my highbeast one.

She looks so calm and peaceful, but I guess she is a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, after all.

“Eep!”

I was dragged from my thoughts by a flick to the forehead.

“Your eyes were glazed over, fool. Pay attention,” Ferdinand scolded me. “As the treasure in this game, you *must not* leave this circle; simply make a shield of Wind and wait inside your highbeast. You are forbidden from doing anything unnecessary.”

Ferdinand was wearing his armor atop his clothes. He removed two of the protective charm bracelets from my arms and put them on his wrists, then he took off his completely unembroidered Ehrenfest cape and replaced it with his usual blue one, which was covered with protective magic circles. Justus was helping him with that, while I gazed in the direction of the knight building and thought back to the Interduchy Tournament.

“Is it wise to abandon the Interduchy Tournament to play ditter like this, Ferdinand?” I asked, thinking that Sylvester and the others would have a hard time dealing with all the visitors without us.

Ferdinand grimaced. “Had we postponed this to a later date, we would have attracted the attention of an unwanted crowd and even

the king himself. We have no choice but to do this now, while everyone is distracted with the Interduchy Tournament. You have no right to complain, as I was quite clear about not wanting to participate before my hand was forced.”

Indeed, it seemed that I was the thoughtless one here. “My apologies,” I said. “Still, what exactly is your plan here? Did you really need to wrap Lady Hannelore and me into this?”

“You are more than capable of defending yourself, no? This will allow me to preserve mana without needing to devote unnecessary attention to the treasure,” he replied, looking down at me. He had spoken as though the answer were obvious, but there was something I refused to let slide—he clearly had no intention of protecting me whatsoever.

“Didn’t you say that you were going to protect me and that I didn’t need to worry?!” I exclaimed. “It was literally moments ago, and you said it with a great big smile too!”

“Even the gods require ample time and preparation before they may save Geduldh from Ewigeliebe. Not to mention, this is *your* battle for books, is it not?”

“It is, but... Lady Hannelore can’t use Schutzaria’s shield or Angriff’s blessing. It feels kind of cheap for us to rely on them.” In fact, it felt extremely cowardly.

Ferdinand scoffed. “What are you even saying? Duels are determined by how well one uses what is available to them. I only fight battles where my victory is assured.”

“I know.”

“Then make a shield of Wind as soon as you land in your highbeast. You wish to obtain these publishing rights, no?”

I gave a big nod and produced my Pandabus. Ferdinand, Heisshitze, and Hannelore all produced their highbeasts as well.

“Is everyone ready?” Aub Dunkelfelger called.

We all flew down to our respective circles. As the treasure, Hannelore and I couldn’t leave our designated spots—doing so would cost us the game.

“Begin!” Aub Dunkelfelger roared, his voice reverberating through the training grounds. The spectating Dunkelfelger knights erupted in cheers while Ferdinand and Heisshitze shot toward each other.

As Ferdinand had instructed, I poured mana into my ring. “O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Hear my prayer, and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm.”

Schutzaria’s shield formed with a hard, metallic *clank*... and an instant later, Ferdinand called out with slight urgency in his voice.

“Rozemynel!”

“HRAAAAAAH!”

Wha...?

My eyes had been lowered in prayer, and when I gazed up again, I saw Heisshitze launching a blast of mana at me. I also heard traces of what I thought was Hannelore letting out her own shrill battle cry, but with the oncoming blob of glowing white mana blocking my line of sight, I couldn't see what was happening. After inhaling sharply, I closed my eyes; I could rely on my shield to protect me, but the thought of something shooting toward me was still terrifying.

As I waited in darkness, there came a sudden, thunderous explosion as mana slammed against Schutzaria's shield. I trembled for a second and then timidly opened my eyes. The blob of mana was gone, such that I could see only the familiar sight of Schutzaria's transparent yellow shield.

“She blocked Heisshitze's attack?!” one of the spectating knights cried. “What even is that?! It doesn't look like *geteilt*.”

“Is it some kind of hemispherical shield?” a second knight ventured.

“Look out, Lady Hannelore!” shouted a third.

It seemed that Hannelore had attacked Ferdinand at the exact same time as Heisshitze attacked me, only to trigger a counterattack from his protective charms. Thin beams of light were quickly homing in on her.

“*Geteilt!*” Hannelore cried, producing a shield which she immediately hid behind. She somehow managed to block the counterattack, but she was completely still; I could guess from her reluctance to move and the tears in her eyes that she was overcome with fear. The one saving grace was that her initial attack hadn't been that strong—the charms that had activated doubled the power of the attack they received, so the resulting counterattack wasn't actually that powerful.

Thank goodness! I'm so, so glad Lady Hannelore is safe!

I sighed in relief, unable to suppress a smile as I stayed inside Lessy and behind Schutzaria's shield. Ferdinand, however, seemed to be anything but relieved—he was wearing the same look of displeasure he always wore when things didn't go as he'd expected. He had presumably intended to use the charms to return an attack from Heisshitze, not Hannelore.

He knew Heisshitze would start things off with a powerful strike, then.

After years of experience battling with Heisshitze, Ferdinand must have expected to be the target instead; that was presumably why he had taken some of my protective charms. Maybe Heisshitze had chosen to attack me because he realized that Hannelore was too far

away to do it herself, or maybe he had just wanted to check how strong my defenses were. I had managed to block his efforts either way, but the unexpected decision had still caught Ferdinand off guard.

“Be careful, Heisshitze!”

“He’s got charms that can counter attacks!”

Again, the Dunkelfelger knights watching the battle started yelling out advice. They had a good view of the whole battlefield, unlike Heisshitze, who had been focused on attacking me, so they must have seen the charm activate.

“That was a counter for physical attacks! Try to avoid those!”

“No, Lord Ferdinand isn’t the kind of man to have two charms with the same effect!” Heisshitze shouted, replying to the knights’ calls at last. “Physical attacks are safer now, if anything!”

He’s right! I think his keen insight deserves a round of applause!

Just as Heisshitze assumed, those were the only two charms Ferdinand was wearing—one to counter physical attacks, and the other to counter magic attacks. One had now been used up, and not by Heisshitze’s powerful attack, but by Hannelore’s fairly weak cover shot.

Eep. I think I just saw Ferdinand click his tongue.

Ferdinand moved to attack Hannelore, his expression grim, only to be met by a swift downward slash from Heisshitze. Not only was the Dunkelfelger knight faster—he was more precise too. I could see Ferdinand widen his eyes as he blocked the attack with his own sword, resulting in the sharp wail of metal on metal. A beat later, both men twisted their blades to end the deadlock and then immediately attacked again. For a second time, Ferdinand blocked Heisshitze’s attack, this time with an even harsher look.

Heisshitze, in contrast, was grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t think I’m the same as I was ten years ago!” he said and then launched into a flurry of attacks.

I widened my eyes in shock. Back in Ehrenfest, Ferdinand was completely unrivaled... but here, it took him everything he had just to block and dodge Heisshitze’s onslaught. He was outmatched in both speed and skill.

“That’s it! Keep it up! You’re in the lead!”

“Just make sure to stay close! Don’t give him time to change weapons!”

“Yeah! Get ’im! You’re faster and better in a sword fight!”

The spectators continued to lavish their side with support. It was easy to discern from their cries that Heisshitze was better with a sword than any other weapon.

Heisshitze had spent ten years as a Dunkelfelger knight since his graduation, and it really showed—he was clearly stronger than

Ferdinand, who had mostly spent his time locked away in the temple, helping the Knight's Order only when necessary. Of course, the fact that Ferdinand was managing to block these attacks at all was very impressive, considering that Heisshitze seemed to live and breathe battle, but his uneasy expression made it clear that he was being overwhelmed. It was the first time I had ever seen Ferdinand struggle against an opponent.

"I see you reaching for that magic tool, but I won't give you a chance!" Heisshitze yelled, staying on the offensive so that Ferdinand had no time to wield a magic tool or morph his schtappe. The flashes of white and the loud ring of clashing blades were enough for me to tell he was launching some incredible attacks, but even with enhancement magic, I was unable to follow them with my eyes. "All that time in the temple's made you go soft. Haven't been keeping up with your training?"

"No, as I am not a knight," Ferdinand replied. He was trying to speak in his usual tone, but I could notice the slight aggravation behind his words. I took in a large breath of air; he was never usually like this.

Just what's going on here?! Is he actually going to lose?!

I had assumed that Ferdinand was going to breeze through this match, so his struggling was the absolute last thing I had expected. My heart pounded with anxiety, and a cold sweat ran down my back.

How can I help? What can I do that won't get in his way?

I took out my schtappe and filled it with mana, desperately racking my brain for ideas as Ferdinand continued to be beaten back by Heisshitze's strikes.



“Look out for Lady Rozemyne!” a knight called.

“She’s taken out her schtappe!”

I was far enough away that nobody would be able to hear me, so I quietly spoke a prayer. “O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve, I pray that you grant Ferdinand your divine protection.” In an instant, blue light shot out of my schtappe. I could only hope it would help him in some way; I didn’t ever want to see him lose.

“Huh? What did she just do?”

“Was that a blessing?”

As the clamoring knights watched on, Ferdinand recovered some ground thanks to Angriff’s blessing. He seemed to be less desperate than before—the tension in his expression was gone, and now he looked as stone-faced as usual. Even so, Heissshitze still appeared to have the upper hand.

Now what? How else can I help?

Once again, I strained to come up with an idea, but Ferdinand interrupted my thoughts with a loud bark. “Do *not* interfere, Rozemyne! My victory is assured, so simply wait there until then!”

“Right!” I called back and got rid of the schtappe in my hand, which I had been just moments away from turning into a water gun. Then, I allowed the anxiety to drain from my body.

Everything’s going to be fine; Ferdinand just said so himself. He never accepts battles he isn’t guaranteed to win.

I had no reason to doubt him, but I still clasped my hands together as if in prayer. Their highbeasts continued to dart through the air, and the shriek of clashing blades seemed endless. Even I could tell that Ferdinand was getting slower—presumably due to the relentless assault—so it must have been clear as day to the huge crowd of spectating knights. They cheered and shouted words of support for their duchy, practically on the edge of their viewing seats.

“Come on! You’re so close!”

“Just one more push!”

“Finish him!”

Their support seemed to make Heissshitze even faster. He continued his assault on Ferdinand, who was now breathing heavily, and then cried out as he launched another powerful attack. Ferdinand narrowly avoided it, but now he was wide open.

“It’s over!”

“Ngh!”

Heissshitze moved in for the finishing blow, but before he could strike his target, Ferdinand grabbed his blue cape and spread it before him. “What?!” Heissshitze barked. Continuing with his attack would

win him the battle, but it would also ruin the blue cape he was fighting for. He paused for a split second, not wanting to slice through his spoils... and that gave Ferdinand the perfect opportunity.

A magic tool sparked, causing a small explosion between the two men that threw them in opposite directions.

“No!” Heisshitze yelled. He frantically stood up from the dust of the explosion, his confident grin replaced with a look of panic. Ferdinand had also been knocked back, and when he next came into view, his schtappe was no longer morphed into a sword. Instead, in his hands were magic tools that looked like feystones.

“The tables have turned, Heisshitze,” Ferdinand said, now wearing the most overbearing smirk. The arrogance with which he was suddenly carrying himself made it painfully hard to picture him as the hero in this situation—in fact, it seemed to justify his infamous nickname, “the Lord of Evil.”

Thank goodness. This is the Ferdinand I know!

“I can’t believe he used the cape as a shield...”

“That’s the Lord of Evil for you—always using dirty tricks!”

“That wasn’t even slightly fair! But, well, it was exactly what I wanted to see!”

Again, the obstreperous crowd roared with excitement; evidently, this wasn’t the first time Ferdinand had done something so underhanded. He had been gasping for breath just moments ago, but now he looked calm and composed. It seemed that tricking Heisshitze was his forte.

“Ngh... Don’t think you’ll turn this around that easily!” Heisshitze stormed. He readied his sword, hoping to reclaim his advantage, but was immediately stopped in his tracks when Ferdinand threw a magic tool at him. A second explosion shook the grounds, but even then —“Don’t think that’ll stop me either!”—Heisshitze refused to give up. He charged at Ferdinand, slicing through several more magic tools and forcing his way through the resulting explosions, deftly moving his highbeast to close the distance between them.

“Just get through this!”

“He can’t have that many more tools on him! He wasn’t prepared for a battle!”

The knights’ abrupt cries made me jump, but they were right—Ferdinand must have been working with limited resources. His greatest specialty was setting traps well in advance, but this ditter match had been decided out of nowhere and in the midst of the Interduchy Tournament, meaning he hadn’t been given time to prepare in his workshop. Things had progressed so suddenly, in fact, that he had even found it necessary to take back some of the charms he had given me. It seemed safe to say that he was at an extreme

disadvantage.

Is Ferdinand actually going to be okay...?

I could feel my chest begin to tighten as anxiety coursed through me, but then... It happened.

“*Water gun...*” Ferdinand murmured, morphing his schtappe into a very familiar shape. He then squeezed the trigger again and again, firing out one multiplying arrow after another.

“Wha?! Whoa! What’s this?!” Heisshitze exclaimed. He seemed to be completely stunned in the face of such an alien weapon, but he narrowly avoided its attacks nonetheless.

Ferdinand continued to fire the water gun with one hand, expressionless, while throwing magic tools with the other. He must have been calculating where Heisshitze would dodge to, as after just a few shots, Heisshitze was forced onto the defensive. Unable to determine what kind of weapon the gun was and how to fight against it, the most he could do was evade.

“What is that thing?!” one of the knights shouted.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before!” another cried.

As the spectators were swept into a frenzy, Hannelore called out to them in shock. “That looks like the water gun Lady Rozemyne made in class, but she said it was a toy, not a weapon. I saw it shoot water, and it didn’t do any damage!”

Ferdinand looked down at her and scoffed. “It was modified to be usable as a weapon—and quite a convenient one, I might add. Observe.” He took another shot at Heisshitze before effortlessly turning the gun on Hannelore and squeezing the trigger again. A single arrow flew out, divided in number, and then rained down on her.

“Look out, Lady Hannelore!” I cried on instinct, standing up while still inside Lessy. Hannelore thankfully produced a shield just in time to block the arrows, but as I was sighing in relief, a cold voice crashed over me.

“Rozemyne, whose side are you on?”

“S, S-S-S, Sorry!” I stammered. “My friend was in danger, so it kind of just... slipped out.”

Even then, Ferdinand refused to forgive me. He ordered me not only to avoid making any unnecessary moves, but also to stop shouting out, so I zipped my lip and sat back down.

Still... I mean, you’re totally the villain here. Who wouldn’t want to cheer for the underdog hero?

I watched on in silence, observing as Ferdinand used his magic tools and water gun to knock Heisshitze from his highbeast and then immediately moved to attacking Hannelore.

Aah! LADY HANNELOOORE! Someone help her!

I clamped a hand over my mouth and watched with wide eyes. Then, suddenly, a bright, almost blinding light began arching toward Ferdinand at tremendous speed. Heissshitze had launched a ball of mana at him, even while falling.

Wait, no!

“Alright!”

“Good job!”

The knights were ecstatic about Heissshitze’s show of perseverance, but I could feel the blood draining from my face. The other charm Ferdinand was wearing countered magic attacks, so it blocked the ball of mana and fired something even more powerful right back at Heissshitze. He was still in a free fall, so he had no means of avoiding it.

“Heissshitze, no!”

“He has another charm?!”

As the knights cried out, Heissshitze twisted in midair, trying to turn a direct hit into a glancing one. Of course, it was a futile effort—the counterattack struck him head-on and threw him in my direction at unthinkable speed.

“Eep!”

I recoiled in fear as the huge man barreled toward me, but a moment later, he simply bounced off Schutzaria’s shield and was thrown even farther by the wind. After arcing through the air, he struck the ground with such a massive *thump* that I reflexively leapt to my feet.

“A-Are you okay?!” I called. I was pretty sure he was alive—I could see him twitching in pain—but his wounds certainly weren’t light. He was a mess, but as much as I wanted to cast healing on him, even I wasn’t thoughtless enough to restore an enemy during a battle.

As I eyed Heissshitze, I saw him weakly pour a rejuvenation potion down his throat. Apparently, he had no choice but to wait for it to take effect.

May your recovery be swift.

I turned my attention from Heissshitze to Hannelore, who was now caught in a staring match with Ferdinand across the treasure boundary line. She was gripping her shield as tightly as she could, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Heissshitze is immobilized,” Ferdinand said, his schtappe readied. “If you accept defeat, leave your territory willingly.”

Despite how much she was trembling from behind her shield, Hannelore looked up at him and refused. “I-I am an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger. No matter how inevitable defeat may seem, I will never surrender by choice!”

Ferdinand could only blink in surprise, while the spectating

knights started to cry out for the umpteenth time that day.

“HURRAHHH! Lady Hannelore!”

“That’s it! Show ’em you’re a real Dunkelfelgerian!”

Ferdinand heaved a frustrated sigh. “Then I have no choice but to force you out. We must settle this before Ehrenfest’s match in the Interduchy Tournament.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he shot a band of light from his schtappe, used it to ensnare Hannelore, and then flung her out of her duchy’s treasure spot like a freshly caught fish. It was a feeling I knew all too well.

“AAAAAAH!” Hannelore cried as she was abruptly swung into the air.

“Lady Hannelore...!” Heisshitze groaned. Since drinking the potion, he had recovered just enough to force himself up and sprint over, and he caught Hannelore just before she hit the ground.

Wow! Heisshitze is a true man among men! A knight among knights!

Of course, Heisshitze couldn’t slow down and ended up falling over, but Hannelore remained largely unhurt.

“That’s it!” Aub Dunkelfelger declared. “Ehrenfest wins!”

Ehrenfest had won the moment Hannelore left the treasure circle. I dispelled Schutzaria’s shield and flew over to her and Heisshitze in my Pandabus.

“Ferdinand, I would like to heal their wounds,” I said. “May I grant them Heilschmerz’s blessing?”

“You would do that...?” Hannelore asked, blinking in surprise.

“Erm, we would appreciate it, but...” She was looking not at me, but at Ferdinand, who conceded with a shrug.

“Do as you wish, Rozemyne. I am used to you showering those around you with compassion, but if you must behave like this, I would rather you show some appreciation to your allies as well...”

“Wha...?”

I hadn’t noticed due to the complete lack of expression on his face, but on closer inspection, Ferdinand was covered with wounds. It baffled me that he managed to look so indifferent when he was clearly very hurt.

“You should allow yourself to look at least a little injured, Ferdinand. How am I supposed to notice you’re in pain otherwise?”

“Never reveal your weakness to your enemies, fool.”

“Well, you didn’t reveal it to your ally either!” I exclaimed, my cheeks puffed out as I climbed out of Lessy. I sat Ferdinand, Hannelore, and Heisshitze down, poured mana into my schtappe, and then said, “May Heilschmerz’s healing be granted,” as I started tending to them one by one. Green light overflowed from my schtappe and healed their wounds.

“I thank you,” Hannelore said with a cute smile and stood up once

the blessing had eased her weariness.

Heissshitze was the most wounded, but the blessing restored him all the same. He stood up, looked down at himself, moved his arms and legs, then looked at me with surprise. "You seem to have used quite a bit of mana indeed," he said, amazed that he could now move with ease. "Thank you, Lady Rozemyne."

"Yes, I also feel fine," Ferdinand agreed. He stood up as well, then told me to return my authorization stone to the aub and get into my highbeast. "The battle is settled, and you may discuss the more precise details of your agreement later. For now, if we are to make it in time for the second half of the tournament, we must return to our dormitory for lunch. You wish to see Cornelius's valiant struggle, no?"

"I do."

As Ferdinand continued to hurry me, I returned the feystone and jumped into my Pandabus. He similarly returned his and climbed onto his highbeast.

"Now then," he said. "We shall be off."

"Wait! I want to hear about your new weapon!" Heissshitze called out. He extended a hand to stop Ferdinand, who paused in the air, turned around, and smirked.

"I have no reason to tell you anything. If you wish to know, try to seize victory next time. You must train not only your body and mana, but also your mind, for you will never defeat me if you cannot think of more efficient means to battle."

Come on—seriously?! You taunt him like this and still wonder why he keeps challenging you to duels?! Geez! Geez! Geez!

As we made our way out, I heard the Dunkelfelger knights shouting vows to challenge Ferdinand again.

Ditter at the Interduchy Tournament

“Rozemyne, give me a rejuvenation potion,” Ferdinand said as soon as we returned. “You have more in your room, no?”

“Don’t you have some of your own?” I asked, looking at him quizzically. The blessing worked only to heal wounds and ease pain, not restore mana, so I understood why he would need a potion, but I was pretty sure he always carried his own ones with him.

“I could use them, but then I would have none left. Now that I have expended almost all of my magic tools, I would like to keep at least a few rejuvenation potions on my person.”

He seemed so cool and composed at the time, but could that have been an extremely narrow victory back there?

Now understanding the reason for his request, I gave Ferdinand one of the rejuvenation potions hanging from my hip. I also extended an arm and asked whether he needed another charm.

“No. I would rather not reduce your defenses even more.” He then chugged an ultra-nasty potion without so much as the slightest change of expression, handed the empty bottle to Rihyarda, and asked for a refill.

“Erm, Ferdinand...” I said and instinctively tugged on his sleeve.

“Do not worry about me,” he replied. “There are no other duchies that will abruptly challenge me to a ditter match.” There was nothing more to say about the matter, so I relinquished my grip on him and smiled in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Well, at least there aren’t more duchies like Dunkelfelger,” I noted. “That really would be problematic...”

“Quite the opposite. If there were more, they would surely fight among themselves. It would make my life much easier.”

“Do you think so? I feel that, no matter the situation, Heisshitze would always challenge you specifically.”

“I do not even wish to consider that.”

It seemed that everyone else had already finished eating and returned to the tournament, as the dormitory was completely empty. Ferdinand and I rushed to eat, then joined them in the knight building where the event was being held.

“Have we made it?” I asked.

“Yes,” Ferdinand replied. “Ahrensbach is playing right now, which means Ehrenfest should be playing after the next game.” The order for

the second half was apparently determined by the results of a mock battle held during classes, and since Ehrenfest had scored rather highly this year, they were due to play later.

I observed other duchies socializing on our way to the Ehrenfest spectating area. It was quite fun to watch, since family members wearing colorful clothes stood out amid the usual black of the Royal Academy. They were all wearing styles popular in the Sovereignty, but on closer inspection, each had a unique vibe.

“A finsturm, hm?” Ferdinand said, muttering to himself with a glance toward the arena. “This should be over quickly. They are used often during practice.”

All of the Ahrensbach spectators were on their feet and eagerly cheering on their players, so the most I could see were the backs of their light-violet capes and the same-colored capes of the participating knights flying through the air on their highbeasts. I couldn’t even see the feybeast or what it looked like, so I soon gave up on watching the fight and focused on walking as quickly as I could. We needed to get back to our own viewing spot before it was Ehrenfest’s turn.

“How do you think Ehrenfest is going to place?” I asked.

“Luck is an enormous factor in this type of ditler—how well one knows the fey creature involved can dramatically change how long it takes them to defeat it. That said, only fey creatures that can be overwhelmed with raw firepower are ever sent out; it would be much too dangerous for the students to play with beasts they might not be able to defeat on their own. And thus, apprentice knights ceased to use their brains. It truly is quite a conundrum...”

And with that, we arrived back at Ehrenfest’s spot. Sylvester came over the moment he saw us to ask whether we had won our ditler game, and I replied with a big nod.

“Ferdinand was wonderfully evil, as his nickname would suggest,” I said. “He used the prized cape as a distraction to throw his enemy off guard, then exploited the opening to launch a counterattack. It reminded me once again that he doesn’t have even the slightest amount of chivalry to his name.”

“I am not a knight, remember; I have no need for chivalry. And you cheered my opponent on midway through the fight, did you not?” Ferdinand scoffed, narrowing his eyes at me. “I would rather you act more the part of a saint.”

“Oh, but did I not produce Schutzaria’s shield, give Angriff’s blessing, and even provide Heilschmerz’s healing at the end? I must have come across as the perfect saint to everyone else present.” In addition to that, unlike during last year’s ditler, I hadn’t launched any surprise attacks or given any unsolicited instructions. I had obediently stayed in my highbeast and observed the battle from afar.

Sylvester raised a hand as if to interrupt my protest. “Rozemyne, the details of the match can wait. I want to know what was decided afterward.”

“The specifics are going to be ironed out later,” I said.

Sylvester nodded and then glanced over at Florencia, whose smile broadened at once. Perhaps it was just me, but I could feel a certain intensity radiating from her. “That’s good, because both sides are going to need some time,” he said. “I’m sure Aub Dunkelfelger will need to speak to his first wife and retainers as well.”

The aubs had essentially settled this matter between themselves, and it seemed that their wives were less than pleased. Florencia had apparently cautioned Sylvester against agreeing to the ditto match, which explained the vein bulging on her forehead.

“Our trade with Dunkelfelger will most certainly come up during the Archduke Conference, with Aub Dunkelfelger requesting a trade deal in return for their listening to our request to some degree,” Ferdinand said with a polite—and noticeably false—smile. “I will trust the rest to Aub Ehrenfest’s skill in political matters.”

All of a sudden, a loud cheer reverberated in the air, and we heard Rauffen’s magic tool-enhanced voice boom through the arena. “Ehrenfest, come forth!”

The apprentice knights had already gathered at the very front of our spot, within viewing distance of the arena floor, and they all climbed onto their highbeasts and took flight. The number of dark-yellow capes on highbeasts increased, with the apprentice knights flying loops above the arena.

“Now, let’s see just how much they’ve grown,” Karstedt said, seeming quite interested. Elvira was a step behind him, having come to see Cornelius’s upcoming feats of heroism.

First Sylvester and Florencia, then Wilfried and Charlotte moved to fill the gap left by the apprentice knights. There was also space for me to watch as an archduke candidate, but despite my best efforts, I struggled to see over the strangely high wall separating us from the action. I could have craned my neck and stood on tiptoe, but no archduke candidate would ever risk doing something so ungraceful.

“Milady. Here you are,” Rihyarda said as she put a stand in place for me. I climbed atop it, and immediately, everything was visible. I could see the apprentice knights getting into position.

“Thank you, Rihyarda.”

“Now, let’s cheer them on.”

My retainers gathered around me, and together we watched the arena. I was hopeful that we could win—at least, I was for a brief moment, but when the professor arrived to make a fey creature atop the magic circle, my heart sank. Waving at the ensuing cheers was

none other than Fraularm, and she snickered as she looked over at us. I had a really bad feeling about this, and it seemed that I wasn't alone—there were outbursts of “Oh, come on...” and “Her, of all people?” from those nearby.

“Why is Professor Rauffen not making the fey creature?” I asked, my cheeks puffed out.

“Because a single professor wouldn't be able to activate enough magic circles for each match,” Karstedt, who watched the tournament every year, explained. “According to Lamprecht and Cornelius, to prevent trickery, dorm supervisors are never put in charge of their own duchy's circle. Everything else is decided by drawing lots, so who gets whom comes down to chance.”

So in short, Ehrenfest has terrible luck.

“Do you think there might be foul play?” I asked.

Karstedt merely shrugged.

“There is not much she can attempt with so many eyes on her,” Ferdinand said. “The most she could possibly do without sullyng her reputation as a professor is create an obscure or time-consuming feybeast.”

“You make that sound harmless enough, but isn't that a huge disadvantage for speed ditter?” I asked. Ehrenfest was playing sixth from last after doing well in the mock battle, and if we performed terribly compared to all of the duchies that had come before us, then our place in the rankings would no doubt be called into question.

“There is very little to worry about; the apprentices performed admirably even when that one exceptionally rare feybeast appeared,” Ferdinand replied in a low voice. He had nothing but high praise for how we had dealt with the ternisbefallen, which meant our chances against this feybeast would greatly depend on whether Leonore recognized it.

I swallowed hard as I gazed down at the arena. Fraularm produced her schtappe and said some spell, activating the magic circle. It glowed bright and then slowly faded to reveal a large, wiggly... blob. It didn't roar like the previous fey creatures, nor did it launch an immediate attack. I couldn't even see where its head was; at first, I assumed Fraularm had simply failed in her attempt to make something.

“A hundertteilung, hm?” Ferdinand muttered, sounding vexed. “This is problematic.” Apparently, it was a feybeast that lived near Ahrensbach's oceans and divided itself each time it was attacked. This would continue until it reached its smallest possible size, and only then could it be killed. It wasn't a very strong feybeast, but it took forever to kill.

“What's that?” someone in the crowd asked. “I've never seen

anything like it before.”

“Is this actually a fey?” another muttered.

As the stirring continued, Fraularm glanced our way for just a single moment before making her exit. Rauffen, the judge, then shouted, “Begin!”

Leonore gathered everyone together and started to say something while looking down at the completely immobile hundertteilung. Cornelius and Traugott then began storing up their mana, as if preparing to launch repeated full-power attacks, as the other apprentice knights scattered, readied their shields, and prepared to endure the aftershock. Leonore did the same, positioning herself right next to Cornelius.

“Oho, so she knows how to deal with hundertteilungs, then?” Ferdinand remarked, his voice making his satisfaction exceedingly clear. “She is very learned indeed.” His compliment was reassuring to hear; my initial assumption had been that Traugott was about to go nuts again.

Leonore swiftly cut through the air with her right hand, and Cornelius swung his sword down in turn, launching a blob of mana toward the hundertteilung. Traugott attacked at the same time and then readied his shield for the upcoming shockwave, while Leonore moved forward to shield Cornelius, who was building up mana again.

This is a battlefield, but it feels like they're in their own little world...

And it seemed that I wasn't the only person who thought so—Elvira was letting out coos of delight beside me, presumably making a mental note of material for a new book.

Cornelius readied his mana-filled sword from behind Leonore's shield and then swung it with a thunderous, “Hyaaaaaah!” A second blob of mana, which seemed a bit smaller than the first, flew toward the hundertteilung. There came a loud explosion a mere moment later, and a number of tiny creatures scattered all over as if riding the aftershock.

“Aim for the heads!” Matthias shouted. “Act fast, before they have time to remerge!”

The gathered apprentice knights began moving all at once. The hundertteilung—once a squishy blob—had become a multitude of miniature snakes, which would apparently form together to become one big snake if given the opportunity. Traugott and Cornelius's full-power attacks had successfully split it into its smallest form.

“The only way to defeat a hundertteilung is to separate it into its composite parts and destroy them all,” Ferdinand explained. “Failing to separate it completely results in an unnecessary swarm that will simply fuse back together again and achieves nothing but exhausting all those involved. Instead, to be victorious, one must strike it with a

strong enough mana attack to fully divide it.”

I nodded along while looking down at the fight. The apprentice knights were having a rough time, since they needed to kill the tiny, scattered snakes without letting them reform. Thankfully, it seemed that a simple stab to the head was enough to finish each one off. It looked so easy that even I could have managed it.

Cornelius withdrew to chug a rejuvenation potion and then began flying around the arena. Meanwhile, Leonore shouted, “Fall back, those in front of me!” before swinging and throwing something. It blew open in the air and spread wide.

“A net?” I asked myself.

Something resembling the net that Ferdinand had used to defeat a horde of feybeasts at once on the Night of Schutzaria had spread out and seized a bunch of the smaller hunderteilungs. Leonore then let out a shout, and a moment later, all of the blobs she had trapped were exterminated. She repeated this three more times, targeting the densest clumps, then left Matthias in charge and retreated to a safe distance to recover her mana.

“That net requires quite a lot of mana...” Karstedt murmured, impressed. “I didn’t notice during her normal training, but I see Leonore’s capacity has grown quite a bit.”

Elvira’s dark eyes sparkled, and she let out a happy sigh. “She must have worked so hard to catch up to Cornelius. Love truly makes a woman strong. I am moved by the mental fortitude of a young woman in love who wishes to match her partner’s mana as closely as possible. I must write this down.”

Oof. Rest in peace, Cornelius, Leonore.

Cornelius had kept his relationship a secret from me for an entire term, fearing that Elvira might find out about it; I saw no reason to intervene for his benefit. Of course, I wasn’t going to let anything happen that would make life in the dormitory hard for Leonore—Florescia had asked me to promise her that much—but as for the rest, I would simply sit and watch.

Hmph. As soon as Leonore graduates next year, Cornelius is in for a world of suffering. His romance is going to be turned into a book sooner or later.

“Aha! Judithe is going all out too!” Karstedt exclaimed. “Your guard knights are something else, Rozemyne.”

I turned my attention to the arena and saw Judithe holding knives between her fingers, throwing one after another at the blobs. Each one struck a tiny hunderteilung square in the head, causing the snakes to evaporate.

“Judithe, they are scattered far apart at three-one-one. Clean them up!” Matthias said, flying up a little higher than everyone else and

giving instructions in Leonore's place. "Traugott, some are merging at two-five-one. Stop them. Rudolf, some are sticking to the walls. Deal with six-four-three. Natalie, one-four-two."

Traugott had refused to follow any orders last year, so the fact that he was obeying the instructions of a medknight probably went to show just how much he had grown.

"What are those numbers Matthias is saying?" I asked.

"They reflect the space in the arena," Ferdinand replied. "I used them often myself; they make it easier to give orders and translate well to gewinnen demonstrations in post-game meetings. It is fortunate that male socializing involves gewinnen so heavily."

Aah. Did Matthias and everyone start using them because they've been referencing Ferdinand's guides? Interesting.

"Well, how do they know where to go when there aren't any lines or symbols? I wouldn't be able to respond to such random numbers so quickly..." I said. There was a circle for the feybeast, a circle for the knights to wait in, and a line between them, but no other markers to serve as visual cues. If someone had belted off a string of numbers like that to me, I wouldn't have had even the slightest idea of where to go.

"There were a few female knights in my day who struggled to follow them, as your female knights are struggling now, and it took much practice before they could move as soon as they were instructed. There is nothing one can do but train until it makes sense."

Cornelius and Leonore recovered their mana and started assisting with killing the remaining hunderteilungs until, eventually, only one remained.

"Judithe, there's the last one!" Matthias called.

Without missing a beat, Judithe threw a knife at the snake below, piercing its head with perfect accuracy. At that instant, the glowing magic circle dulled.

"Ehrenfest, finished!" Rauffen boomed.

Those of us watching from Ehrenfest's spot moved aside so that our apprentice knights would have space to land. They returned one after another, while those wearing Hauchletzte capes took their place in the arena.

Once the apprentices had put their highbeasts away, they knelt in front of Sylvester and Florencia. "Aub Ehrenfest. My apologies," Cornelius said, speaking as a sixth-year and their representative. "We did not push our ranking as much as we had hoped."

"No need to apologize," Sylvester replied. "You expertly dealt with a feybeast that nobody in Ehrenfest except Ferdinand knows about, and on your first encounter with it as well. It is clear that you have been studying hard and training often—you have more mana, skill, and coordination than last year. Well done."

“We are honored by your words.”

Cornelius and the other apprentices then bowed in unison.

Sylvester nodded and then looked at Karstedt. “Tell me, what are your thoughts as the knight commander?”

Karstedt’s normal place was behind Sylvester as his guard knight, but here he stepped forward, having been granted an opportunity to speak. He planted his feet firmly on the ground, looked down at the apprentice knights, and said, “There is no denying that the Interduchy Tournament values speed above all else, and your battle was far from a quick one, but that mostly came down to bad luck. You all fought unbelievably well considering that it was your first time encountering this particular feybeast. There is still room for improvement, but you have proven that you can follow orders and carry out your individual roles while keeping an eye on what the others are doing. Your growth is clear and steady. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once the apprentice knights had dispersed, it was time for us to return to our tables and socialize again. Wilfried and Charlotte discussed the heroic efforts of the apprentice knights as they headed to the frontmost table, while the rest of us went to the ones farther back.

“Now that I’ve seen the whole dormitory working together and making progress with my own eyes,” Sylvester muttered, “I do feel bad about the former Veronica faction children not getting the mana compression method...”

It was rare for a duchy to have three archduke candidates without splitting up into several factions that refused to assist one another. Children grew differently before and after their graduation, and given that they would one day be the adults running Ehrenfest, Sylvester wanted them to start growing their mana as soon as possible.

“It’ll be rough, but...” he continued and then trailed off. The most I could do was nod in agreement.

Hartmut's Marriage Partner

No sooner had Ferdinand and I arrived at our seats than attendants began busily moving around us, preparing to resume socializing. Hartmut arrived a moment later.

"Lady Rozemyne," he said, "I would like to introduce you to the woman I'm escorting. Do you have a moment?"

"Otilie made it seem like you were courting quite a number of girls," I replied. "Have you managed to narrow it down to one? I am glad you were not violently stabbed in the process."

Hartmut met my response with wide eyes, then put on a bright smile and placed his right hand on his chest. "Please do not frame it like that, Lady Rozemyne. My name is with you. To me, my life is yours, always."

"Don't steal Roderick's emotional lines."

"Enough," Ferdinand said to us both, waving his hand dismissively. "Hartmut would not have you meet just anyone. I imagine that he intends to marry this woman." By formally introducing her to me, his boss, he was proving that their connection was for more than just the escort; his aim was for their parents to meet so that they could discuss progressing things toward marriage. "I, too, wish to know what manner of woman the ever-loyal Hartmut has chosen. Bring her here."

"Understood."

Hartmut went to where the other scholars were gathered and returned with a girl wearing a Dunkelfelger cape. I couldn't help but think that she looked somewhat familiar, and as it turned out, she had been one of the apprentice scholars in attendance at Hannelore's tea party. She had scorched-brown hair that was done in a long braid behind her head and eyes that were the same blue color as her cape. She was almost Hartmut's height, which meant she was rather tall, and her face was flushed red with embarrassment as she walked a half step behind him. Overall, she radiated a lovely sense of innocence.

"Dunkelfelger..." Ferdinand spat under his breath, drawing my attention to him. "Its women tend to be highly calculating—it is impossible to say how much intelligence she will attempt to wring out of us. The question is, can Hartmut contain her?"

"Ferdinand... Did a girl from Dunkelfelger hurt you in the past or something?"

“...No. Such is merely the prevailing opinion.”

It was said that everyone who interacted with Dunkelfelger came away thinking it was a duchy of very manipulative women. I couldn't quite understand it, though; Hannelore was the only girl from Dunkelfelger whom I really knew, and she had never given me reason to think she was conniving.

“I am Clarissa, a fifth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger,” she said. In a shocking twist, Hartmut's partner was the very same woman who had given me her duchy's stories. My opinion of her immediately shot up when I realized that I had already read some of her writing.

Clarissa and I exchanged greetings, after which she said, with a face full of emotion, “At last. At last, I've finally been introduced to you, Lady Rozemyne. I'm overjoyed.”

“Does your coming here mean you've settled on marrying Hartmut, Clarissa?” I asked. “How did you come to such a decision? Um, simply out of curiosity, of course.” I couldn't outright say that I thought he was a total weirdo and that her interest in him seemed strange, so I resorted to more indirect means.

“Do you remember the game of ditter you played with Dunkelfelger last year, Lady Rozemyne?” Clarissa asked.

“Yes, of course.” Perhaps they had gotten close while sharing information over ditter. It was strange but absolutely feasible.

“I was moved beyond words when I saw the fight,” she said, now blushing heavily.

Much to my surprise, what followed wasn't a conversation about meeting Hartmut; rather, it was an impassioned speech about how splendid and magnificent she had found me. I, the tiniest girl in the Royal Academy, had used devious plots to toy with Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights—she recounted this fact with sparkling blue eyes.

“Lady Rozemyne, after that fateful encounter, I resolved to marry an Ehrenfest man so that I might one day serve you,” she concluded.

Um, what? So it has nothing to do with Hartmut?!

Clarissa had then begun gathering intelligence in her search for a man who met her criteria. It would take too much time for her to marry someone younger, meaning they needed to be her age or older, and since she wanted to serve me after marriage, he would ideally need to be my retainer. He also needed to be someone her parents would approve of; considering Ehrenfest's rank, it wasn't uncommon for even fellow archnobles to have wide gaps in their mana capacities.

The only two men who suited her needs were Cornelius and Hartmut, both archnoble honor students. Cornelius had turned her down, since he already had someone else, but Hartmut was a free man who spent his time getting friendly with girls from other duchies to

collect intelligence of his own.

"I asked Hartmut to date me with the expectation of marriage," Clarissa continued. I nodded in response, listening attentively, only to be taken by surprise when Elvira suddenly spoke from behind me.

"Yes? And then?"

I turned around and saw her taking notes with a businesslike expression, much like one of my scholars.

"How did you convey your feelings to Hartmut?" Elvira asked. Hartmut was the one who replied, and his eyes grew somewhat distant as he spoke.

"Clarissa was more intense than any woman I've ever met. She suddenly kicked my feet out from under me, pinned me to the ground, and thrust a knife against my throat."

"What...?" I asked.

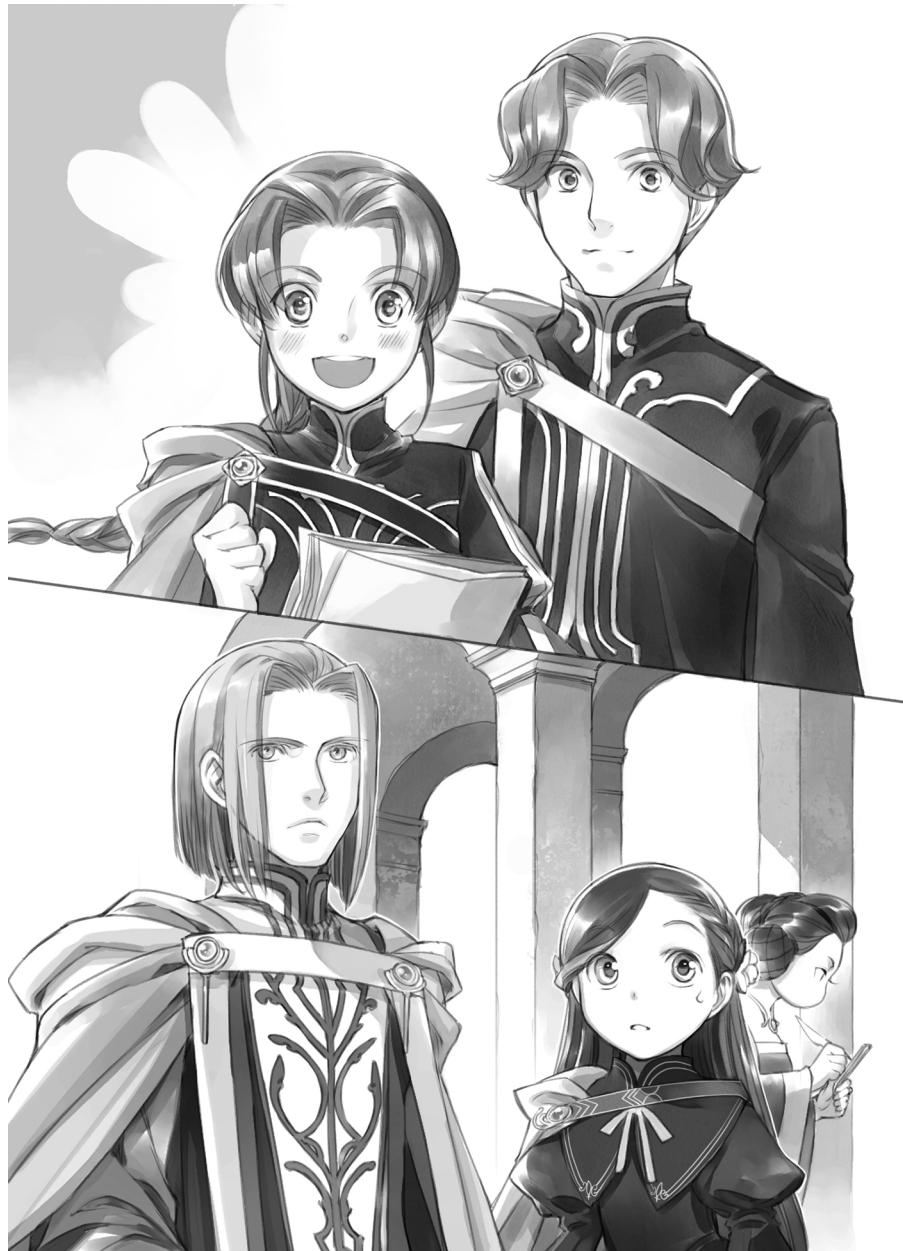
"For a moment, I didn't know what had happened," he continued. Clarissa had apparently held him down with her body weight and, while holding a blade to his throat, demanded that he give her missions to complete to earn his hand in marriage. Hartmut, feeling that his life was in danger, had no choice but to comply. In the end, not only had Clarissa completed every challenge she was assigned, but she had also eliminated the other girls Hartmut was friendly with one by one, thereby removing all rivals for his affection. It seemed that to Clarissa, love was something won through intensity and guts, not displays of romance.

So, in Dunkelfelger, girls can be the dominant ones when it comes to starting romances... That's news to me, but also not something I really wanted to know. Clarissa looked like such a normal girl at first too.

"I completed his missions and could finally date him with marriage in mind. And now, he is introducing me to you at the Interduchy Tournament, Lady Rozemyne..." Clarissa said shyly, as if embarrassed to talk about her own romance like this—not that I found what she was saying even the slightest bit romantic.

Mm... I just can't believe their relationship started with cutthroat bloodshed.

I looked at Hartmut, who was standing next to Clarissa. He seemed so at ease, but was he really fine marrying a girl who had shoved a knife in his face?



“Hartmut, how do you feel about this marriage?” I asked. “Erm, it sounds like your meeting was quite shocking and dramatic, so...”

“It certainly was, but no matter how many times I extolled your virtues at length, Clarissa always listened with great interest. I also can’t imagine our decisions to prioritize you above each other will ever become a point of contention for us. I couldn’t hope for a better marriage partner.”

Oh, geez... I want to celebrate Hartmut getting married, but this really doesn't seem like a pairing I should encourage.

As I contemplated the situation, Clarissa looked straight at me, her shy expression suddenly hardening. Perhaps she thought I was going to oppose their union, but before I could even respond, her eyes gleamed with the kind of rigid determination I had come to expect from Dunkelfelgerians. “I understand that marrying Hartmut does not automatically mean I get to serve you, Lady Rozemyne,” she said, “but being able to enter your service is my greatest wish—one that I hope to realize, no matter the cost. I asked Hartmut to arrange this meeting so that I could convey this to you.”

From there, Clarissa began to sing her own praises. She had become an apprentice scholar after failing the selection exam for apprentice knights but still favored the sword more than the pen, so she had started training with the other knights anyway. Now, she could double as both a scholar and a guard, and she made sure to note that she would serve as a valuable asset for negotiations between our two duchies.

Wait, what? Wasn't this supposed to be about marriage? It feels like I'm overseeing a work interview.

“You claim to be a scholar of the sword—someone who can serve as a guard as well—but what of your scholarly skills in particular?” Ferdinand asked. “Pray tell, what research are you prioritizing for your graduation next year?” He must have shared my thoughts about this seeming like an interview, as he began probing her for more and more details on what kind of research she was doing. It turned out she was looking into magic tools and circles to assist with area-of-effect magic.

“I have worked this hard to ensure that Lady Rozemyne will accept me not just as a scholar, but as *her* scholar,” Clarissa said, holding out a sizable stack of paper. “To that end, I have transcribed all of the books my family owns—there were two, excluding those that Hartmut tells me are already available in Ehrenfest. I brought these with me for this introduction.”

“Goodness, Hartmut, what a lovely and passionate young woman you have found,” I said at once. “And Clarissa, even though you have

already given me wonderful stories before, you went out of your way to transcribe even more books for me... You're hired!"

"Stop, fool. You are being too rash!" Ferdinand chided me. "At least view the contents before you praise them."

I gleefully accepted the stack of papers from Clarissa and started skimming through them, all the while considering the idea of her marrying Hartmut and becoming my retainer. In truth, I really couldn't see there being any downsides for Ehrenfest, aside from the minor inconveniences of there being a second, female version of Hartmut running around.

"Your handwriting is clear, and your transcriptions are well done," I observed. "Furthermore, I believe that Ehrenfest could benefit from having a connection to Dunkelfelger. What do you say to this, Ferdinand?" I gazed up at him, nervous that he might oppose the idea, while Clarissa did the same. He was my guardian, so he had the final say on the matter.

"Hm... I am somewhat uneasy about trusting a scholar of the sword with negotiations, but Hartmut should provide his support. If you wish to accept Clarissa, then you may do so."

Clarissa turned to look at me, her blue eyes brimming with hope.

"In that case," I said, "once you marry Hartmut and move to Ehrenfest, I will accept you as my retainer."

"I thank you ever so much," Clarissa said, her face flushing red with joy.

With that settled, Hartmut stepped forward. "Lord Ferdinand, Raimund visited a moment ago," he said. "If you have the time, he wishes to deliver his completed work in person."

"Very well. Bring him."

The couple left together for Ehrenfest's scholar space. As they went, I could see Clarissa happily say something to Hartmut and him respond in turn.

"Are most Dunkelfelger girls like Clarissa?" I asked.

Ferdinand frowned. "She is very different from the Dunkelfelger women I know; she has the mind of a knight above all else, and her means of proposing marriage was unusual, to say the least."

"It really was a shock to hear that she conveyed her feelings to Hartmut at knifepoint..."

"Yes, quite," Elvira said. "Goodness... How am I supposed to write this?" She looked equally as troubled as she walked off, but in my opinion, there was no need to force this into a sappy romance story. It would probably work better as a how-to guide for winning over boys—an essential read for men of other duchies at risk of courting from Dunkelfelger girls.

"Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne, we have brought Raimund,"

Hartmut said, having returned with him in tow. Clarissa was still with him, since she wanted to see how skilled of a scholar one needed to be to earn Ferdinand's and my approval. We were valuing Raimund very highly despite him being from another duchy, and to Clarissa, he was a rival to use as fuel for self-improvement.

Mm... I guess this makes them like Ferdinand and Heissshitze. Kinda?

Raimund was smartly dressed and wearing his light-violet cape, but his face was pale and showed clear signs of sleep deprivation. He had doubtless been researching up until the very last moment so that he could deliver the task to Ferdinand directly.

After greeting us with a nervous look, Raimund proffered his work. Ferdinand took it and began looking it over, while Hartmut and Clarissa peered at the submitted magic circle with great interest. I joined them, since this task had come at my suggestion: modifying a teleportation circle to be smaller and more mana efficient.

"Your improvements are decent," Ferdinand said. "However, if one adds this form to the magic circle here, one could enable mana assistance from feystones and ultimately lessen the burden on the user."

"Feystone assistance... The task was to provide a magic circle that even laynobles can use with ease; would feystones be that easy for them to acquire?"

"I would assume so; they are simple feystones," Ferdinand replied, but his opinion here could hardly be relied on—he was privileged enough to have an abundance of mana and resources, and his thoughts on the matter were unlikely to account for this. I was about to mention this when Clarissa interjected.

"Even commoners can kill feybeasts and take their feystones, so having an assisting magic circle would be for the best."

"Commoners can obtain feystones? To what end...?" Ferdinand asked. Both he and Raimund were staring at Clarissa in surprise.

"But of course. They can encounter feybeasts when they hunt in the forest and even defeat the weaker ones on their own. There are shops in the city that purchase feystones from them, so I don't see why laynobles wouldn't be able to manage."

Wowee... Dunkelfelger must have strong commoners too. I'm so glad I wasn't reincarnated into that duchy; I would definitely be dead right now.

"There are feystone stores in the lower city, where commoners live?" Ferdinand asked, blinking in confusion alongside Raimund. Perhaps such stores weren't a thing in Ahrensbach or Ehrenfest. I had once lived in the lower city myself, but I had spent so much of my time indoors that there was little I could say about it.

In any case, Ferdinand concluded his evaluation by telling Raimund to investigate whether even low-quality feystones would

work, and to add the assisting circle to his existing work if so.

“As for your new task... Rozemyne, is there anything else you need?” Ferdinand asked. The ball was now in my court, perhaps because he couldn’t think of anything without his documents at hand.

I gave a big nod as an endless stream of ideas came to mind. “I would like for you to improve the library magic tools that feature in the documents I borrowed from Professor Solange,” I said and then started to describe each one. There was a great variety—some that told the time using lights, some that cleaned the grounds, some that quieted the voices in the reading room, some that stopped time to prevent old documents from rotting, some that stopped the sunlight from damaging the books, and so on.

“So, what are the magic circles like?” Raimund asked.

“They weren’t illustrated in the documents I read, so I couldn’t tell you. The most I can say is that I want magic tools that can help in the running of a library. Professor Solange will also benefit from tools that require less mana.”

Ferdinand sighed. “I have several illustrations of magic tools used in libraries; I will supply your next task based on those,” he said to Raimund. Apparently, Hirschur’s teacher’s teacher’s teacher had made some of the magic tools used in the library, and Ferdinand still had a few documents on them.

“Perhaps it would be wise to visit the library to investigate this further,” Raimund said, forming his plans with a sparkle in his eyes. “Hopefully the magic circles are somewhere they can be easily observed.”

“Lord Ferdinand,” Clarissa added, “please grant me a task as well.”

“Get your tasks from Rozemyne. You wish to be Rozemyne’s retainer, not my disciple,” Ferdinand replied flatly.

Clarissa turned to me with a look of almost overbearing desperation. In the end, I decided to task her with creating a magic tool that would capture anyone who tried leaving the library with a book they hadn’t checked out properly.

The last few games of ditter concluded while we were busy with our discussion. Rauffen’s booming announcement filled the arena, informing everyone that things were over.

“The awards ceremony will soon take place,” he said. “Students, descend to the arena grounds after fifth bell.” In the meantime, we were supposed to do a quick cleanup. Apprentice scholars began collecting the precious magic tools they had taken out for the research announcements, while the apprentice attendants started cleaning up the silverware and sweets that had been served.

“Now then, you two—return to your duchies,” Ferdinand

prompted Clarissa and Raimund. They complied, but their reluctance was clear on their faces; apparently, they had been quite enjoying our conversation. I had enjoyed it myself, since it was about magic tools for the library.

No sooner had fifth bell rung than Wilfried and Charlotte rose to their feet, having been anxiously waiting the entire time.

“Let’s go to the arena, Rozemyne,” Wilfried said.

“I imagine things will get crowded if we all go at once, so please go on ahead,” I replied. “I trust you can keep our students in order down there. Charlotte, please handle the flow of traffic. I will remain here for as long as possible to preserve my stamina.”

Wilfried and Charlotte nodded in agreement, then began giving out instructions. My most important duty here was preserving my stamina, such that I didn’t collapse in front of royalty.

After confirming that most of our students had reached the ground, Ferdinand turned to me. “It is about time. Once you have descended, we will observe from the front,” he said. It seemed that guardians would go to the front of the arena and watch the awards ceremony from above, like we had done during the ditter matches.

“I can only hope that many of our own are recognized as honor students this year,” I said and stood up. At that moment, one of the charms hanging from my arm activated. It flashed to life, then fired a bright, bluish-white arrow, much like when it had automatically activated against Rauffen.

“Wha...?” I blinked in surprise as Ferdinand suddenly pulled me to him. Eckhart simultaneously drew his schtappe and went on the defensive, followed a beat later by Cornelius, Leonore, and Judithe.

“Guh?!”

There came a sudden exclamation from somewhere relatively nearby. Cornelius and Leonore sprinted over to find its source, while Judithe stayed behind to keep me safe. It wasn’t long before Cornelius returned, dragging along the student who had taken the brunt of my counterattack.

“This is the culprit who attacked Lady Rozemyne.”

“No, no! I didn’t mean to attack an archduke candidate!” the student replied, having turned pale from the unexpected turn of events. He was an archnoble from Immerdink, the previous Tenth duchy that was now irritated at Ehrenfest for surpassing it. Apparently, this change in rankings had caused a girl from a greater duchy to break up with him, and now his anger and resentment were directed at Hartmut, who was now due to marry a girl from a greater duchy himself.

The student from Immerdink had apparently tried to throw a

feystone at Hartmut's leg in a sudden fit of rage, only for his target to inadvertently move aside. It had struck me instead, which had, of course, activated my charm. No matter who the boy was, he was pretty dang unlucky—although it hadn't been his intention, he had just attacked an archduke candidate from another duchy. We couldn't let him off without any repercussions, but at the same time, there was also no need for me to make a fuss right before the awards ceremony. It seemed best to let the adults deal with things later.

"While this boy brought much pain to himself, I am unhurt, so I have no intention of administering further punishment," I said. "Aub Ehrenfest, you may bring this matter to Aub Immerdink." I was going to leave the rest with him and Ferdinand, but before I could fly down to the arena, Ferdinand tightened his grip on my arm and pulled me closer.

"Rozemyne," he warned in a quiet voice, "I believe that was your last charm for reflecting physical attacks. Take care not to leave your guard knights under any circumstances; it is impossible to say how duchies jealous of the change in rankings will react."

Cornelius nodded with a hard expression, responding in my stead.

Unforeseen Consequences

I could tell from the clumps of different colors that most students had already descended to the arena grounds for the awards ceremony. Ehrenfest was the dark-yellow blob of capes, and since Wilfried and Charlotte had been the first to leave our viewing spot, I assumed they were already among them.

“I see Ehrenfest is over there,” I remarked.

“Please descend toward that circle by highbeast,” Hartmut said, leading the apprentice scholars and apprentice attendants down. I followed after them a moment later, surrounded by guard knights.

Once all of the students were lined up, royalty entered. The arena was quickly surrounded by knights flourishing black capes, and highbeasts with widely spread wings descended one after another. It was obvious which one was the king—he had the Sovereign knight commander Raublut guarding him and came out before Anastasius and Eglantine.

He’s even younger than I thought...

From appearances alone, he looked to be no older than Karstedt, and although his features resembled those of Anastasius, they were noticeably harder and more dignified. He and his first wife, along with all the other royals, ascended onto a platform wearing thick, heavy-looking outfits. There was Prince Sigiswald and his wife, as well as Prince Anastasius and his fiancée Eglantine. Hildebrand would apparently be sitting this one out, since he hadn’t yet attended his debut.

“Ewigeliebe the God of Life grants his harsh judgment each winter, and your gathering here today means you have all endured it...”

The awards ceremony began with a greeting from the king. His clear voice, magnified by a magic tool, echoed throughout the arena grounds. My heart pounded with excitement as I gazed up at him and the other royals, taking in the atmosphere of my first awards ceremony. Eglantine was a sight to behold even from this distance, and as I saw the hairpin Tuuli had made standing out against her golden tresses, I couldn’t help but sigh in awe.

And then, out of nowhere, several thunderous explosions shook the arena. One by one, pillars of roaring flame shot into the air—two from among the audience seats, and another from the arena grounds

where we students were standing. All were far from where Ehrenfest was gathered, but the sudden noise made me turn on instinct. I could see the fires rising.

There was a moment of complete silence, then people began to scream. The air was filled with their ear-splitting shrieks while the guard knights around me each barked “*geteilt*” to ready their shields and moved into a defensive formation around me. The nearby students came to their senses a beat later and produced their own shields to protect themselves, while the apprentice knights moved to protect the other archduke candidates.

“O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side...”

As my three guard knights continued to protect me, I started intoning the prayer to make Schutzaria’s shield. My efforts were interrupted, however, when another loud explosion sounded out from nearby. The apprentice scholars and attendants had shields of their own, but without the necessary combat training, they were unable to stop themselves from being flung back. I instinctively reached out for them, but—

“No!” Leonore shouted. “Please remain still, Lady Rozemyne! You are the one in danger!”

“Your safety is our highest priority,” Judithe added, her face sternly set. “Lord Bonifatius said so. Guard knights exist to protect the archducal family. Scholars and attendants come later.”

They were entirely right, and I retracted my hand just as more explosions resounded across the arena. This time, there was no fire, only the violent tremors of each blast. This made no difference to the panicked students, of course; the screams and chaos continued to intensify.

Calm down... Safety first. Healing comes later.

I closed my eyes, trying to block the wounded from my thoughts, and repeated the prayer. “O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Hear my prayer, and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm.”

There was a metallic *clink* as Schutzaria’s translucent shield formed around us. It was only as large as our designated space on the arena grounds, and as it was circular, those standing in the corners outside its perimeter weren’t given any shelter.

“Can everyone from Ehrenfest fit inside?” I asked. “Prioritize the first-years who can’t yet form their own shields and as many defenseless apprentice scholars and attendants as possible.”

At my instruction, the older apprentice knights left the safety of the shield to begin herding the first-years inside. Meanwhile,

Cornelius and my other nearby retainers gazed up at my creation with wonder.

“Lady Rozemyne, what is this...?”

“Schutzaria’s shield,” I replied. “It’s a little bigger than what you’d get from chanting ‘geteilt.’”

“That’s quite an understatement, Sister...” Charlotte noted in an exasperated tone, evidently comparing my shield to the ones the apprentice knights were using.

“Those with malice toward me cannot enter this shield, which means we are safe inside. But in any case, some were hurt before I could form it, were they not? Please bring them to me. I shall heal them at once.”

“We are not injured enough to warrant your concern,” one of the wounded attempted to protest. “These are mere bumps and scrapes—nothing for you to waste your mana on!” But I was unwilling to budge on the matter.

“There is no knowing when we might be called to action, so we must keep ourselves at full strength. Are the apprentice knights who played ditto all fully recovered? Use your rejuvenation potions now while we still can. None can say what might soon happen.”

“We are honored, Lady Rozemyne.”

With Schutzaria’s shield produced and the wounded healed, Ehrenfest’s safety was secured, at least for now. I used the brief moment we had been afforded to examine our surroundings and quickly deduced that the other duchies had either fallen into chaos or promptly formed defensive positions. There were no in-betweens.

Those from Dunkelfelger were already clad in armor with their shields at the ready and withdrawing to their audience seats by highbeast in orderly formation—as anyone would expect from a population of such battle-ready warriors. The duchies whose viewing spots were now engulfed in flames, however, were unsure where to retreat to. Their defenseless apprentice scholars and attendants had been thrown into a massive panic.

“Aah! A feybeast! Kill it!”

“You lot are in the way! Move!”

We heard shouts from all over, and the apprentice knights around me readied for battle again.

“What?! It got bigger?!”

“This thing?! Here, of all places?!”

A hulking form began to rise up amid the chaos, similar in appearance to a black dog and with small, differently colored eyes on its forehead that flitted about in all directions. There was no mistaking it—it was a *ternisbefallen*.

The explosions alone had thrown the arena into chaos, and this

unfamiliar feybeast that seemed immune to all attacks had plunged the apprentice knights into a terror beyond controlling. Their chain of command was shattered.

“Do *not* attack it! Get out of our way!” shouted the Sovereign knights, but their words fell on deaf ears. The students were launching one frantic attack after another, while the ternisbefallen sucked up their mana and continued to grow.

“GRAAAAAAH!”

As the beast roared, the Sovereign knights were already taking action with their black weaponry at the ready. It seemed they had divided themselves into two teams, one charged with protecting the royals and the other with slaying the ternisbefallen, but they were being held back by the panicking apprentice knights and their wild attacks.

“Lady Rozemyne, can you grant us black weaponry?” the Ehrenfest apprentice knights asked me. They had defeated a ternisbefallen before and were sure they could be of some assistance.

“I cannot,” I replied. “The king has forbidden us from using it.”

“But...”

The ternisbefallen lunged at some students, its mouth opened wide as it attempted to snap them up. An attack from a Sovereign knight knocked it off course just in time, preventing any casualties, but the battle was far from over.

I instinctively produced my schtappe, and a moment later, a black mass appeared near the stage where the king was still standing. Without even the slightest hesitation, all of the Sovereign knights who had been trying to kill the ternisbefallen in the arena turned around and worked their way back to the stage, prioritizing royalty over the students.

“Lady Rozemyne, please grant us black weapons to defeat the ternisbefallen near us!”

“Would you abandon them?!”

As much as I didn’t want to leave the students to fend for themselves, apprentice knights weren’t taught to make black weaponry. Even back in Ehrenfest, they weren’t allowed to use them at all. Wielding such weapons here in the Royal Academy simply wasn’t an option, especially in front of the king himself. I pursed my lips and looked up at the audience seats, where the adults with power were. We underage students couldn’t do anything, but perhaps they could.

Sylvester! Ferdinand!

It was then that a booming voice came from somewhere behind me and echoed throughout the arena. “We shall assist the Sovereign Knight’s Order! To that end, we request permission to wield black

weapons!" I turned to see blue-capes lined up in sharp rows, with Aub Dunkelfelger standing at the front. They had their weapons ready, and it was clear they would leap down as soon as they were told to sortie.

"We permit duchies with black weapons to use them!" the king declared in response. "Defeat the Darkness feybeasts!"

"Understood!"

Now with royal permission, the blue-caped Dunkelfelger knights descended upon the arena. I was a bit uncertain about whether it was proper for an aub to lead a feybeast hunt, especially when it meant leaving the women, scholars, and such alone... but on closer inspection, the duchy's students had already met up with their guardians in the audience seats, and the apprentice knights were looking after the noncombat personnel. Their expert coordination put them on a completely different level from anyone else.

As I watched the Dunkelfelger knights with my mouth agape, Ferdinand descended with Eckhart and Justus. "I came out of concern that you might grant the apprentices black weapons, but I see you were thoughtful this time," he said. "Tell me, what is the situation?"

The apprentice knights all gave uncomfortable looks, having been repeatedly asking me for black weapons.

"Some were scraped or bruised when caught up in the explosions," I replied, "but I've healed them, and they can now mobilize at any moment. Shall we go up to the audience seats?"

"No. There is a ternisbefallen up there as well, albeit not a large one. The duchies granted permission to use black weapons are already working to slay these beasts, so leave the matter to them and wait here." Hearing his clearly stated orders was enough to make me sigh with relief; having even just one reliable adult around made things so much better.

"Dunkelfelger certainly has a lot of knights..." I observed.

"They leave only the bare minimum at their duchy so that they can bring as many as they can here to observe the ditter tournament," Ferdinand replied. "I considered their obsession with ditter to be nothing but a cause for exasperation, but I see now that their enthusiasm can sometimes be helpful. To be frank, I find it quite heartening to see such a sizable Knight's Order capable of operating with complete coordination, even during an unexpected situation like this."

In contrast, Ehrenfest had only brought as many knights as was needed to protect the archducal couple and the parents who had come to watch their children in the tournament. Barely anyone had the power to participate in the feybeast slaying.

"They're quite strong..." I said. "Are we just going to leave things to them?"

Ferdinand glared at the ternisbefallen by the stage, his expression hard. A moment later, Wilfried, who had been keeping an eye on our surroundings, shouted, “Uncle! There’s a ternisbefallen here!”

I turned and saw people screaming at the beast that had suddenly emerged nearby. It was dangerously close to us, having appeared in Immerdink’s spot. Some green-caped students desperately tried to fly away by highbeast, only to be knocked down, while others struggled to escape the gnashing teeth coming straight for them.

“Move aside! We’re forming our highbeasts!”

“Close your ears, all of you! None must hear the black spell!”

Eckhart and Ferdinand instantly produced their weapons and, after pausing to form their highbeasts, sprang into action. They cast the black weapons spell while all the students were covering their ears, then jumped onto their highbeasts.

“Ehrenfest students, do *not* leave Rozemyne’s shield, no matter what!”

Everyone had now gathered that the ternisbefallens grew when attacked, but some couldn’t help but retaliate when one got close. Ferdinand swung his weapon to launch an attack, but in that moment, the ternisbefallen swelled in size.

“Lord Ferdinand!” Eckhart yelled in a panic.

The beast’s suddenly massive claws had torn through the cape Ferdinand was wearing—the one that was completely devoid of protective charms, unlike his usual blue one. I remembered that he had mentioned feeling unsafe wearing it, and this clearly demonstrated why. The color drained from my face, my eyes were wide, and my mouth hung open. I was unable to speak.

“I am fine,” Ferdinand said. “Let us finish this in one blow, Eckhart. It seems we have no time to simply watch.”

Ferdinand recovered at once, as if making a point that he didn’t need my concern, and soared high into the air while pouring mana into his black weapon. The ternisbefallen must have noticed the dense mana above it, as several of its eyes started following his movements.

“Come, Karstedt!” Ferdinand shouted during his ascent.

Karstedt was tasked with protecting the archducal family and was dealing with a ternisbefallen in the spectating area, but even so, he flew over at once with his black weapon in hand. He and Ferdinand seemed to coordinate without exchanging any words or signals—presumably, they were well accustomed to their particular roles when fighting together—and silently moved into position while readying a full-power attack.

“Brace yourselves, everyone!” Ferdinand warned. “The blast will affect all, whether friend or foe!”

Speed was an absolute priority here, since the ternisbefallen was

surrounded not by trained knights, but by a crowd of confused students. Ferdinand declared that he would wipe it out in a single blow, no matter how much collateral damage this caused, so I poured as much mana into Schutzaria's shield as I could, hoping it would endure the aftershock.

"Hyaaaah!"

Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Karstedt all struck the ternisbefallen with a huge mana attack, with no regard for their surroundings. The beast disappeared so suddenly that it was kind of underwhelming, leaving a single feystone in its place, but the impact was far from a letdown.

Students cried out all around me. Schutzaria's shield trembled and made sparking noises as it bore the shockwave, but it seemed to endure thanks to my constant supply of mana. Those who had been closest to the ternisbefallen weren't able to stand their ground with just their shields to protect them, so many were flung back, especially the nearby Immerdink students.

Of course, students weren't the only ones affected by the blast—the Dunkelfelger knights, who were fighting another ternisbefallen elsewhere while trying to minimize collateral damage, were hit as well. Several knights who hadn't seen the shockwave coming were thrown into the air.

"What idiot launched a full-power attack with this many people around?!" came a shout from Heisshitze, who had been flung back just as he was about to land a blow himself.

"Me," Ferdinand replied coolly. "Use your brain and finish this quickly. Acting slowly is exactly what the enemy wants." He then returned to the safety of my shield, disappeared his highbeast, and walked straight toward me. The students between us quickly stood up and made a path for him. "Rozemyne, I was hit by the ternisbefallen. Heal me. Flutrane first."

He turned away from me, revealing his completely shredded new cape—and a series of reddish-black welts that ran down his back. The red wasn't just blood; there was sludge like that which I had seen at the gathering spot wriggling on his wounds too.

"This happened to you earlier?" I asked. "And you said you were fine?! This doesn't look the slightest bit fine!"

"Slaying the beast took priority. If you have time to complain, use it to heal."

As instructed, I first purified the wounds with Flutrane's blessing, refilling the mana-drained parts, then used Heilschmerz's blessing to close them. Meanwhile, Ferdinand chugged a rejuvenation potion. Eckhart did the same.

"Will we be retreating now?" I asked.

"It depends on what happens above," Ferdinand replied. "Our

enemy deliberately waited for royalty and students without adequate combat experience to gather in this arena. After causing some explosions and releasing ternisbefallens, I doubt they are going to be content with just causing some panic. We are better off remaining here within Schutzaria's shield, where we are safer and can observe the situation, than separating and risking attack." He then paused for a moment and said, "How is your mana?"

"Still fine," I replied.

As we spoke, I could see the knights of other duchies descending to protect their students—maybe because Ferdinand had just carelessly blown them all aside with his attack, or because Dunkelfelger had started rethinking its approach and was now prioritizing speed over minimizing collateral damage.

"The fact that the knights are mobilizing suggests the viewing areas have been at least somewhat secured..." Ferdinand muttered as he watched the descending highbeasts. I noticed that some among them were moving strangely—that they were plunging straight toward the stage.

"Ferdinand, those highbeasts..." I said, but before I could even comment on them, he had assumed a defensive stance.

"O false king! He with no Grutrissheit! Feel the wrath of our fallen allies!"

The men riding the highbeasts at the front of the charge cried out as they dropped more ternisbefallens from boxes they were carrying under their arms. Apparently, they were nobles who had survived the purge despite their duchy having lost the civil war. Sovereign knights wielding black weapons cut down some of the falling ternisbefallens, but this distraction allowed the highbeasts to get even closer to the king.

They're suicidal terrorists?!

They rushed toward the king with no regard for their own safety, aiming only to attack their target. Before them was none other than Eglantine, readying a shield.

"Lady Eglantine!" I cried and instinctively moved to fly over to her, but Ferdinand caught me in an instant.

"Fool!" he snapped. "Our defenses are weak enough already. You cannot leave and cost us our most important shield!"

"But—"

"You may entrust this to the Sovereign knights. Their job is to protect royalty, while yours is to be protected. If you have any strength to spare, use it to protect Ehrenfest in turn."

I watched as the Sovereign knight commander Raublut started cutting down the terrorists. They dropped from their highbeasts, their bodies beginning to swell in unsettling ways.

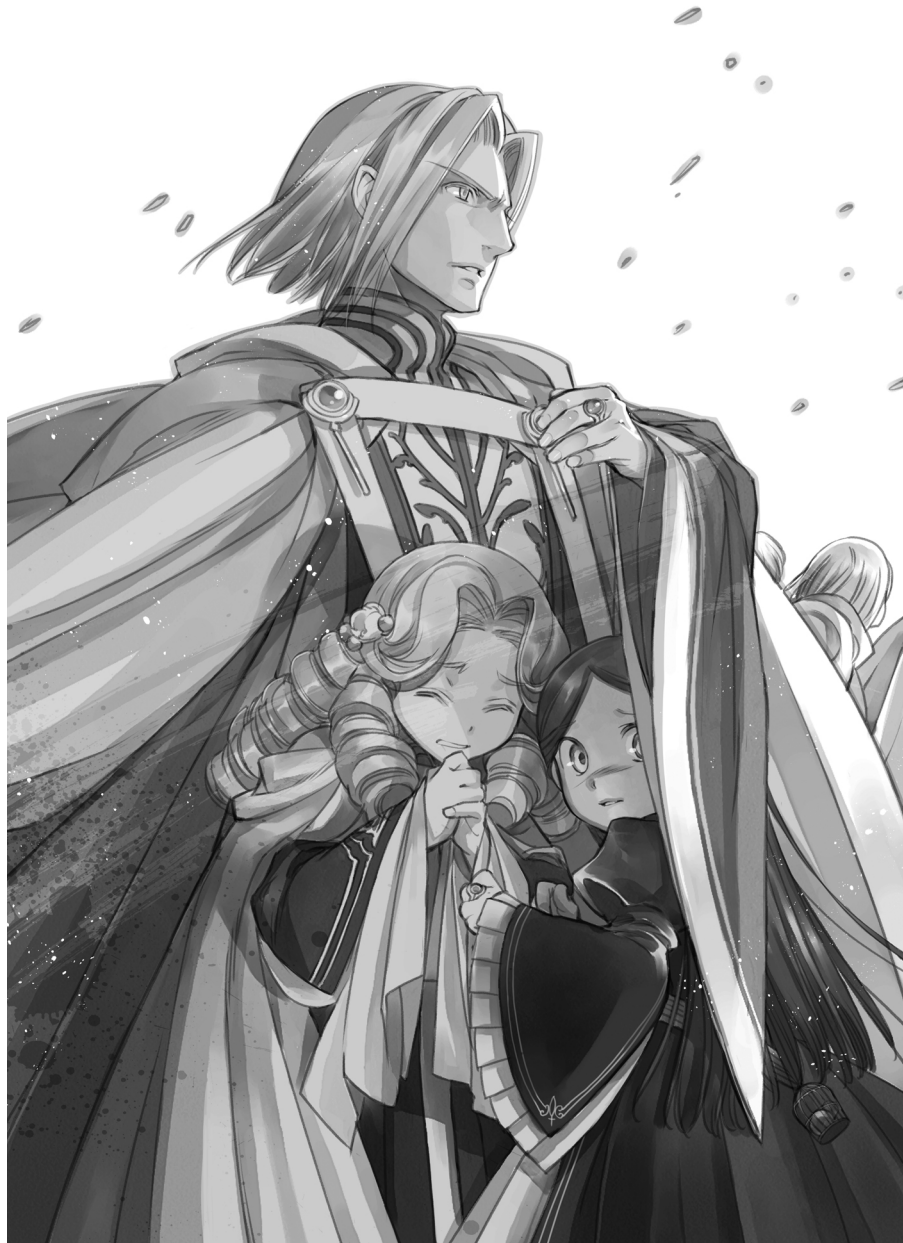
“Avert your gaze, Rozemyne. You too, Charlotte,” Ferdinand said as he covered our eyes with his sleeve. An instant later, there was a series of quiet bursting sounds. The reactions of those around us holding back their urge to vomit was enough for me to guess what had happened.

“Uncle...” Charlotte said uneasily, still unable to see.

“Rozemyne was disturbed to the point of mental instability from Hasse alone,” Ferdinand said plainly. “You are both better off not seeing, else you lose sleep for who knows how long.”

“Right...”

My vision was blocked, but I could tell the situation was changing from the sounds alone. Dunkelfelger slew each ternisbefallen one after another, while the Sovereign Knight’s Order successfully protected the royals to the bitter end.



As it turned out, there hadn't actually been that many terrorists in the end, and those who had revealed themselves were now no more. In their dying breaths, they had unleashed their hatred of the victorious royals—and of all the winning duchies satisfied with their false king.

Once all of the ternisbefallens were slain and the remaining terrorists were dealt with, the main focus became carrying the wounded back to their dormitories, where their duchies would heal them. Some appealed for the awards ceremony to continue with those who remained, unwilling to allow the terrorists even the slightest victory.

“Rozemyne, return to the dormitory with the wounded,” Ferdinand said.

“What?”

“You have protected our duchy’s students with Schutzaria’s shield and healed many. You are low on mana, and if you remain here, it will only cause more problems.”

I don't feel low on mana, though...

Although I thought it was strange, I agreed. Ferdinand would be returning with me, since he was likewise in danger without his protective cape and magic tools.

“Rozemyne is going to have Rihyarda with her, so only Judithe needs to join them,” Ferdinand said. “Cornelius, Leonore, remain here. I believe you have awards to collect.”

“But I—”

“Cornelius, this is your final awards ceremony. Make your parents proud,” Ferdinand said, his voice surprisingly soft and considerate. “Elvira came just to see this.”

Eckhart was next to address Cornelius, who was unable to argue. “Mother really has been looking forward to this,” he said with a reassuring smile. “That is, she’s been looking forward to you and Leonore being decorated together.”

Cornelius slumped over, at which point Eckhart gave him a firm pat on the back and said that he’d look after both Ferdinand and me. In other words, Cornelius really didn’t have a choice in the matter.

Incidentally, I came first in class for the second time—and for the second time, I was unable to participate in the awards ceremony.

The Graduation Ceremony

The awards ceremony went pretty well for Ehrenfest, with two or more students from each grade being called up as honor students. We had plenty of mednoble and laynobles being honor students in written lessons, but not too many during the practical ones. Their lack of mana simply put them at too much of a disadvantage.

Looking back on it, Angelica was pretty weird. She was so skilled that she was selected to perform the sword dance despite being a mednoble, while at the same time having such poor written grades that she nearly had to drop out.

"I am ever so relieved that I was selected to be an honor student," Charlotte said, sighing with relief. "Both Wilfried and Rozemyne have been chosen too, after all." She then mumbled that having older siblings with such high grades had put a lot of pressure on her.

As our conversation continued, I noticed that Wilfried was looking somewhat dissatisfied. "Is there a reason you seem so glum?" I asked him. "You were just recognized as an honor student."

"Ortwin was called right before me, so he must have beaten me by the smallest amount."

As it turned out, Ortwin had put a great deal of effort into his written lessons, as one would expect of a Drewanchel archduke candidate. His small victory here was probably because Wilfried spent so much time obsessing over cool armor and weapons.

"I'll win next year for sure," Wilfried declared.

After we had all finished reporting on the awards ceremony, I decided to talk to Elvira. She spoke at length about how good Cornelius and Leonore looked together, sounding especially excited about the whole affair.

Sylvester came back from the awards ceremony far later than anyone else, and the first thing he did was shoot Ferdinand a very weary look. "Sending Rozemyne back was the best decision you ever made," he said. I couldn't help but wonder what had happened, but before I could even pose a question, I was called to the archduke's room. "We need to plan for tomorrow. Ferdinand, Rozemyne—follow me."

"They probed me about having the Saint of Ehrenfest perform the blessing at tomorrow's coming-of-age ceremony. I turned them down,

but, you know..." Sylvester explained. Apparently, his late return was because the royal family had summoned him directly.

"You're getting ahead of yourself..." Ferdinand said. "Start from the beginning."

The terrorists who attacked the awards ceremony had apparently done so with the motivation of deposing the Grutrissheit-less king. Nobody was able to say whether the biblical fundamentalists who dominated the Sovereign temple were connected to the attack in any way, but one thing was certain—the attempt on the king's life had energized them beyond measure. It seemed the king now felt the Sovereign temple needed to be put back in its place.

"We have no investment in the relationship between the king and the Sovereign temple," Ferdinand said. "And, of course, we could not perform such a ceremony without preparation."

"Obviously. Far be it from me to tell the royal family all that, though."

This was the first time Sylvester had ever seemed more rational than Ferdinand. Feeling a bit confused, I prompted him to continue. "So, how *did* you answer, then?"

"I declined, saying that the attack had put such a great burden on your mana and stamina that we were forced to send you home. I made it clear that a single day wouldn't be enough time for you to recover and even bemoaned that you'd missed this chance to receive public praise from the king... and they bought it. Some of them relented and said that perhaps we should wait to see how well you were doing on the day of, and I took that opportunity to land the final blow with the Immerdink incident."

Sylvester had apparently made his excuse even more ironclad with the mention that, before the terrorist incident, an archnoble from Immerdink had attacked me. The student had claimed that he was targeting Hartmut, but since I was the one he had struck, it was impossible to say how honest he was being. For me to perform tomorrow's ceremony as a High Bishop, I would need to send my guard knights away from the stand, and Sylvester had said that he didn't want to put me in such a vulnerable position.

"As long as you created a sound excuse, I see no reason for complaint," Ferdinand said with a sigh. "I do not wish to set a precedent for Rozemyne replacing the current Sovereign High Bishop. She serves Ehrenfest, not the Sovereignty, and she has enough work already."

I tugged on his sleeve. "Ferdinand, may I at least watch the dedication whirling and graduation ceremony tomorrow?" Cornelius was performing and graduating this year, so I wanted to be there to watch. I stared up at Ferdinand, at which point he started tapping his

temple in contemplation.

“If we wish to continue using your poor health as an excuse moving forward, you should attend only the morning or the afternoon half. Although, condition or no, I imagine you will grow so excited at the sight of Cornelius and Leonore dressed up together that you will only be able to manage a half day regardless.”

Despite his grim expression, Ferdinand hadn't forbidden me from participating. In other words, this was going to be my first time attending a graduation ceremony. Cornelius and Leonore were going to be participating themselves, of course, which meant that Judithe was my only remaining guard knight. It was much too dangerous to put my protection in her hands alone, so we decided to summon Lamprecht and Angelica as Cornelius's family members to have them guard me. We also sorted out several other, minor details, such as who would sit where and who would prepare what potions.

After the discussion, Ferdinand returned to Ehrenfest rather than staying in the dormitory. He needed to recharge my charms so that they could be used again, and prepare some of his own to serve in place of the magic circles embroidered into his cape. I forced him to have dinner before he went, of course—I knew that he'd end up locked away in his workshop all through the night, so I hoped the meal would sustain him until the morning.

The next day, students began filtering into the common room after finishing breakfast, and soon enough, it was time for the parents of those graduating to arrive from the teleportation hall. The apprentice attendants waiting outside guided our newly arrived visitors to their children's rooms.

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Ottilie.”

Hartmut's parents had come to the common room to greet us. I was already very familiar with his mother, Ottilie, but his father was still something of a mystery to me... Or so I thought. After all my wondering about what kind of person he might be, it turned out he was Florencia's retainer—a scholar. His features and the way he carried himself were so profoundly Hartmut that he easily could have passed as an aged-up version of his son. We said nothing to each other now beyond our lengthy noble greetings, but he was a calm person and acted as I would expect Hartmut to, had he not developed such an excessive saint obsession.

Mm? Wait a second. Does this mean that, if we remove all that manic infatuation from Hartmut, we end up with a good-natured scholar who's skilled at gathering intelligence and basically finishes every job they're given to perfection? No, no, no, no... That can't be... This is Hartmut's

father we're talking about. Like his son, he must have some crippling flaw lurking beneath the surface.

I watched them leave for Hartmut's room while these thoughts passed through my mind. My own family was next to arrive; Karstedt, Elvira, Lamprecht, and Angelica all came in what was quite a large showing. Karstedt wasn't serving as Sylvester's guard knight today—he was off work, having left everything in the hands of the vice commander.

“And in return,” Karstedt noted, “we've been asked to guard you, Rozemyne.”

“To think the day would come when I would be guarded by the knight commander himself... I certainly am of some considerable importance now, aren't I? Lamprecht, Angelica, I apologize for the suddenness of all this.”

The two of them had been called over by Karstedt and Elvira last night, soon after their arrival. They both forgave me with smiles, saying this opportunity was their only chance to return to the Royal Academy anyway.

Karstedt and Elvira headed to Cornelius's room, but Lamprecht and Angelica were staying in the common room near me. I asked about Ehrenfest and was told that Damuel was still receiving personal training from Bonifatius, since I wasn't there for him to attend.

“Damuel was sad and said that he wanted to come too,” Angelica said. “Though I'm jealous that he's getting direct training from Lord Bonifatius right now.”

“Something unusual must have happened for us to have been called, right?” Lamprecht asked. “What was it?” Apparently, our parents had given him his orders upon their return home and then gone straight to bed, since they needed to get up early tomorrow.

And so, I summarized everything that had happened during the awards ceremony.

“I see... It certainly is dangerous for you to have only one guard knight in this situation,” Lamprecht said, nodding his agreement.

Meanwhile, Angelica was wearing a blank smile that indicated she hadn't understood a word of my explanation, even though she had been standing right next to us. I decided to shift the topic to something she actually cared about—the ditler match between Ferdinand and Heisshitze. As expected, she jumped on the topic with excitement, her sparkling blue eyes strongly reminiscent of Clarissa's.

“Angelica, I think you might have been born in the wrong duchy...” I observed. She absolutely would have thrived in Dunkelfelger, I thought, but she met my comment with a sullen look.

“No, Lady Rozemyne,” she said. “Those from Dunkelfelger may be good at ditler, but they tend to have good grades as well. I don't think

I would have made it through even their apprentice knight selection process.”

Apparently, Angelica had only started aiming to become a knight after hearing students in the winter playroom talk about the Royal Academy. She wouldn’t have been able to catch up in time to pass Dunkelfelger’s selection exam.

“Not to mention, I wouldn’t have graduated from the Royal Academy in the first place if not for you, Lady Rozemyne. I am very glad to have been born in Ehrenfest,” Angelica added with a blushing smile. This innocent expression contrasting her utterly pathetic declaration put Lamprecht at a loss for words—it seemed that he had finally realized what she was like on the inside.

You’re slow, Lamprecht... Far too slow.

“Lamprecht? You’re here already?” Wilfried asked when he arrived at the common room. He had come over when he saw his own guard knight with me. “You’re going to be guarding Rozemyne today, right?”

“And you as well, Lord Wilfried. As the two of you are engaged, it is only natural that you would sit close together, no?”

“Who knows? The plan is for Charlotte, Father, Mother, and me to sit together, but as Rozemyne is going to have her and Cornelius’s family guarding her, she may be a bit farther away,” Wilfried explained. Apparently, the archducal family sat some distance away from anyone else. “Rozemyne, has Father said anything to you?”

“He has not. Ferdinand predicts that I will pass out from excitement after seeing Cornelius sword dance, however, so I expect to be sitting near him, in a seat close to an exit.”

“Uncle is pretty much your personal doctor by this point, so yeah. How do you feel today?”

I gazed down at my hands. “Fine at the moment, but my passing out comes suddenly during moments of excitement, so how I feel right now doesn’t have much to do with it.”

“Eh. This is your first graduation ceremony, so it goes without saying that you’re going to get emotional. Lamprecht, keep a close eye on her.”

“As you wish,” Lamprecht said, kneeling.

“Dear brother,” I added, “I thank you ever so much for so graciously allowing me to borrow your guard knight.”

“It’s not a problem,” Wilfried replied. “I just want you to participate in these Royal Academy events, even if only a little.”

Charlotte nodded, having finished preparing to go. “It certainly would be sad if you collapsed before you could see the sword dance you’ve been looking forward to oh-so much.”

She was right, and after thanking my cute little sister for being so

concerned about me, I promised to stay in control of my emotions.

It was second-and-a-half bell when our students began leaving for the auditorium, where they would start preparing for the coming-of-age and graduation ceremonies. The plan was for the guardians to come at third bell, then the graduating students soon after. As I wasn't graduating myself, I would be arriving with the guardians in what was an abnormal situation.

"Ferdinand is here, milady."

I glanced up at Rihyarda's prompting to see Ferdinand entering the common room. He was wearing a new cape to replace his previously shredded one.

"Rozemyne, hold out your arms," he said. His brows were drawn into an especially deep frown today—due to sleep deprivation, I originally thought, but it turned out he was just in an especially bad mood. Lamprecht was more surprised to see Ferdinand than anyone, since he wasn't used to seeing him like my retainers who visited the temple.

I did as requested, at which point Ferdinand attached protective charm bracelets to my wrists. He then took out his *schtappe* and said "*stylo*" to form a pen, which he used to make adjustments to the magic circles. I could feel my mana being very gradually sucked into the charms.

"Hm. This will do," he said. "So, have you decided when you will participate?"

"In the morning. I wish to see the sword dance and dedication whirling."

"The dedication whirling, hm...?" Ferdinand muttered, his arms crossed and his already deep frown turning more contemplative.

A short while before third bell, the graduating students came into the common room, having finished their own preparations. Cornelius was wearing his sword dancing clothes, while Hartmut, as a musician, was dressed in his proper outfit, which he intended to wear for the graduation ceremony itself.

"You're going to fetch Clarissa now, right, Hartmut?" I asked.

"Indeed. We intend to meet at a tea party room, as people of all duchies can enter them."

Those escorting someone from their own duchy would simply meet them in the common room or entrance hall, but for couples from separate duchies, the boy would meet with the girl in her dormitory's tea room.

"Her heart must be pounding in her chest, waiting for her man to arrive. I almost wish I could have experienced such a feeling myself..."

Elvira said, sounding noticeably energetic despite the early hour. She was immensely excited for the graduation ceremony, which served as the conclusion for many a tale in *Royal Academy Love Stories*.

“So, what? You were unhappy leaving the dormitory with me?” Karstedt asked.

“My, oh my. Quite the contrary. You see, at a time like this, one’s heart throbs out of uncertain anxiety...” There was the fear that one’s partner might never arrive, that their marriage might not proceed, or that things might simply end after the escort. Elvira explained that these fears made the subsequent joy all the sweeter. “Stories are enjoyable due to these twists and turns, the ever-present danger... but in my own life, I am far more attracted to the stable and peaceful.”

I mean, starting up your own printing business and making books that you have to hide from Ferdinand is far from peaceful, Mother. If you ask me, the life you’ve chosen for yourself seems more like a thriller than anything.

Perhaps the word “peaceful” meant something completely different to nobles. I decided to check with Ferdinand at some point in the future.

“We will now be heading to the auditorium,” Ferdinand said as we started toward the door. “Graduating students, leave the dormitory and form your rows.”

I went with the guardians. Karstedt, Elvira, Lamprecht, and Angelica made for a big enough group already, but with Rihyarda, Ferdinand, and his retainers accompanying us too, we had become quite the crowd.

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me, and they sting. They sting so much!

Ferdinand noted that we would need to move at a painfully slow crawl to match my walking speed, so Karstedt picked me up and started carrying me to our destination.

“Father, I can walk on my own, you know.”

“We don’t want you passing out,” he replied. “Just relax.”

I was even having to participate in this farcical cover story about why I was attending. Everyone was in agreement that I had pleaded to attend the graduation ceremony despite my poor health until my dear father had at last relented, wanting to appease his beloved daughter. Sure, it sounded nice, but I didn’t like being the center of attention.

A huge crowd was already gathered in the auditorium. The walls that were used during classes had been taken down, such that our surroundings now looked entirely like a colosseum with tiered seating. There were no desks or chairs for students in the center like there normally were during classes; instead, there was a circular, ivory stage for the whirling and sword dancing. At the very back of the auditorium was the entryway to the chapel, which I had entered once

before to get my Divine Will. From above, it looked like a semicircle pointed toward us.

“This isn’t the auditorium I remember...” I said, looking around in a daze. I hadn’t thought its appearance could change so drastically.

“Cool, isn’t it? The seating being like this makes it easier to watch the sword dancing and dedication whirling.”

Since I was attending as Cornelius’s little sister today rather than as an archduke candidate, I was sitting with the guardians. We were quite some distance away from the archducal couple, but as archnobles, we were still afforded some of the better seats near the front. Ferdinand was to my right, Angelica to my left, Karstedt and Elvira in front of me, and Lamprecht and Rihyarda behind me. In other words, I was completely surrounded and unable to move.

“Rozemyne, take this,” Ferdinand said.

“A sound-blocking magic tool?”

“Yes. For safety’s sake. I do not trust you to remain silent.”

Ferdinand instructed me not to relinquish my hold on the tool even for a moment in case any weird cries escaped me. I didn’t intend to make any such noises, but I gripped it nonetheless.

A few moments after third bell, the graduating students came in and formed neat lines on the stage. Those being escorted but not graduating went to their assigned seats, at which point the royal family entered and the Sovereign High Bishop took his place before the shrine.

The proceedings seemed very similar to the coming-of-age ceremony I was used to, albeit on a much larger scale. Biblical tales of adulthood were told, and a blessing was given. The prayer was the same one I already knew, but it took a lot longer to deliver, as the students naturally weren’t all born in the same season.

“I see there aren’t any lights, just like when Bezewanst would perform ceremonies...” I observed. Of course, since I was still gripping the sound-blocking magic tool, Ferdinand was the only person who could hear me.

“You might have enough mana to bless all those gathered here today, but you are absolutely an exception.”

The blessing of the new adults came to a close, meaning it was time to offer music and dancing to the gods—a show of gratitude for the divine protection they had provided the new adults with. Everyone descended from the stage, then those who were going to be playing music returned with instruments in hand. I had only ever practiced the harspiel, but I could see plenty of other instruments, ranging from flutes to drums. Some were empty-handed, presumably because they were just going to be singing.

Everyone lined up in front of the shrine and readied their

instruments. “We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world...” they said, reciting an all too familiar prayer to music before launching into a song. It was a celebration of spring, during which the wounded Geduldh was healed, and new life began to sprout.

Once the first song ended, those with instruments descended from the stage and surrounded it. Twenty blue-garbed sword dancers took their place and stood in a line.

“Oh! There’s Cornelius!” I exclaimed.

“I do have eyes,” Ferdinand said plainly. “Contain your emotions.”

Cornelius readied his schtappe-turned-sword and music began to play. He swung his weapon in time with the notes, and the light reflected off its blade with each movement. Angelica’s sword dance had been elegant above all else, and she had moved as smoothly as water, but his was more powerful with heavier slashes, perhaps due to him being a boy.

The dancers were all tremendously skilled, as one would expect from honor students chosen specifically for their sword dancing talent. Their movements kept up with the increasing tempo of the music, creating an experience that simply couldn’t be captured in a recording.

“Is that really Cornelius?” Lamprecht asked.

“Yes, of course,” Rihyarda replied. “He has grown quite a lot since you last spent much time with him, no?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised.”

Angelica nodded again and again in agreement. “He really has grown,” she said, having practiced sword dancing with him up until last year.

Elvira turned to Angelica with a smile. “He must have trained with all his heart so that he could show his best side to his beloved Leonore. You will grow stronger too if you strive to show Eckhart your best side. Perhaps you could do this by improving on your embroidery—no, maybe your socializing...”

“Showing Lord Eckhart my best side...?” Angelica repeated. “Lady Rozemyne, do I actually have any good points? Can you think of any?”

Although the question was directed at me, Eckhart, who was sitting beside Ferdinand, interjected to answer. “Your truest virtue is that you diligently strive to continue guarding Rozemyne without worrying about rushing into marriage,” he said with a smile.

“Understood,” Angelica replied. “In that case, I shall grow stronger as a guard knight without rushing into marriage.”

...Eckhart!

Elvira sighed and shook her head; that was no conversation for an

engaged couple to be having. I could tell it was going to be a long, long time before they actually got married.

After the sword dance came the dedication whirling. Long sleeves fluttered as the seven archduke candidates ascended the stage. I could see Adolphine clad in yellow garb, signifying the Goddess of Wind. Her wine-red hair stood out beautifully, likely thanks to the hairpin that Tuuli had made for her. Rudiger was there as well wearing white garb, signifying the God of Life. His hair was silvery blond, making him seem radiant from head to toe.

The archduke candidates lined up facing the shrine, as the musicians and sword dancers had, then knelt to touch the stage. “We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world...” they began, and no sooner were the words intoned than a magic circle appeared on the pure-white stage. It had all elements, and each one was positioned beneath the archduke candidate wearing the garb of that element’s respective god.

“Ferdinand, that’s the same circle that showed up above the b—”

“I was under the impression that you saw nothing of particular importance on that day. Am I mistaken? Either way, I see it was wise to have you hold this tool...”

“Oh, right. I don’t see anything.”

“Good.”

I had seen last year’s dedication whirling through the camera-like magic tools, but there hadn’t been a magic circle then. Maybe it had suddenly become visible in the same way the bible’s magic circle had, but then what was it? How come Ferdinand was able to see it? Could other people not? I had so many questions, but the most I could do was gaze up at Ferdinand and sigh, knowing full well that he would never give me any answers.

The Library and Going Home

Just as planned, I pretended to feel unwell after the dedication whirling and left early. Karstedt and Elvira continued watching Cornelius, while I returned to the dormitory with Rihyarda, Lamprecht, and Angelica.

“I’m glad nothing happened,” Lamprecht said with a sigh and a partial smile. “You seem to have a strange tendency to get wrapped up in dangerous situations, Rozemyne.”

Angelica nodded in agreement. “That’s why guarding her is worthwhile. Master was especially concerned about Lady Rozemyne. He trained us all over the winter, so now Stenluke is a lot stronger too!” she added and then eagerly started describing what that training had entailed. She replaced so many words with sound effects that I couldn’t really understand much—beyond the fact that she had an unexpected talent for making “boom” and “bang” noises.

“Lamprecht, how have you liked coming back to the Royal Academy after so long?” I asked, changing the subject. He fell into thought for a moment before he replied.

“It’s a bit more startling than fun; after all, this place is a lot different from the Royal Academy I remember. Angelica and Cornelius were chosen for the sword dance, and Mother and Lady Ottilie came with their heads held high. The times really have changed...”

I inhaled sharply. From the way he described things, it sounded as though Elvira and Ottilie hadn’t been allowed to attend previously.

“Lady Veronica was just that harsh,” Lamprecht explained, answering my unspoken question. “She even ordered me to marry an Ahrensbach girl, since I serve Lord Wilfried as a guard knight. Mother protested, so Lady Veronica forbade her from going to the Royal Academy on the grounds that she would disturb Aurelia’s family.”

“That sounds cruel...”

“At the time, it was standard practice. I didn’t even think I needed to introduce Aurelia to our family, since her father was opposed to the marriage, but Lady Veronica required that I escort an Ahrensbach girl. So, I passed on her message, thinking it was better than Mother attending and having a bad time. I thought I was protecting her, but seeing her now, I realize I was being a bad son...”

I smiled, hoping to cheer him up at least a little, and said, “Mother is not so foolish as to miss your intentions, Lamprecht.

Although I am sure she was sad to have missed the graduation ceremony, there are none who ostracize her now, and she is on good terms with Aurelia, no? The god of ordeals gave her a challenge, and she overcame it.”

Lamprecht gave a weak smile in return. Given this opportunity, I wanted to ask how Aurelia was doing with her pregnancy. Surely it would be safe, since we were all family here.

“Incidentally, Lamprecht... How is Aurelia? Is she doing well? Is she bored, by chance?”

“She is leisurely passing the time with books she received from Mother.”

“Gosh, I wish that were me. I mean, erm... Do take good care of her; it must be stressful to be pregnant so far from home. You have a tendency to unload work onto Mother, Lamprecht, so take care that Aurelia does not run out of patience with you.”

My fears were unfounded, however; Lamprecht noted that he was spending a lot of quality time with Aurelia while his lord Wilfried was attending the Royal Academy.

“Though, well...” Lamprecht muttered. “She did say that she misses her duchy’s cooking.”

“Its fish, I presume. The plan is to have some of the court chefs teach my personal chefs how to cook it once we return from the Royal Academy. I already have permission from Sylvester.”

“I appreciate it,” Lamprecht said with a smile.

I smiled in turn. “There is no problem with us sharing the food with Aurelia, as she provided the ingredients in the first place, but teaching the recipes and techniques to your chefs will come at a price, Lamprecht. Do earn plenty of money for your lovely new bride.”

“You would charge your own brother?” Lamprecht asked, balking.

“Of course,” I replied. “I am charging Father, Ferdinand, and even Sylvester, while also granting recipes as rewards to students who raise their grades. Not to mention, the court chefs are only teaching mine in exchange for recipes. Even they aren’t working for free.”

Incidentally, Aurelia had traded me her ingredients in return for the Ehrenfest cloth used to make her veil—at her own suggestion, of course, since she had been hesitant to accept it for free. Had she known any fish recipes, she could have traded those, but the niece of an aub was naturally too important to have ever cooked for herself.

“I would absolutely be willing to trade for some more Ahrensbach fish,” I said, “but Aurelia has no connections to make that possible, does she?”

“Fine, fine...” Lamprecht said, sounding defeated. “I’ll work as hard as I can.”

I put on a big smile, again trying to cheer him up. “The more

dutifully you work for your family, dear brother, the more they'll adore you as a father."

Like Dad...

Everyone else returned to the dormitory for lunch not long after we did—the only part we had missed after the dedication whirling was the Sovereign High Bishop speaking a greeting. The archducal family, the graduating students, and their guardians ate first, since there wasn't room for everyone to dine at once, while the other students would eat later.

At my table were Karstedt, Elvira, Lamprecht, Angelica, Cornelius, and even Leonore. We talked about the coming-of-age ceremony and sword dancing while eating a special menu only served during the graduation ceremony.

"Your sword dancing was positively wonderful, Cornelius," I said.

"Thanks, Rozemyne," he replied with a soft expression, having allowed the tension to leave his body. Leonore, in stark contrast, was stiff as a board as she sat beside him. I spoke to her next, hoping to help ease her nerves a little.

"Leonore, you were chosen to sword dance next year, no? I am looking forward to it ever so much."

"I suppose I must practice often and strive to ensure that my dancing does not appear inferior to Cornelius's in your eyes, Lady Rozemyne."

"Indeed," Karstedt added. "Many in the Knight's Order are rejoicing that more Ehrenfest students are being picked for the sword dance each year. Do your best."

"I will strive to meet your expectations," Leonore replied. She had a very diligent personality, so I trusted that she would practice as was necessary and very reliably deliver on her promise.

"Incidentally, Leonore," Elvira interjected, "I believe you had that outfit ordered just for today? Will you be ordering another for your own coming-of-age ceremony next year? That would be most unfortunate, since you've used such good cloth to make such a beautiful outfit already..."

As one was required to wear longer skirts upon coming of age, it seemed that Leonore wouldn't be able to wear her current dress again next year. However, she shook her head with a small smile and said, "I consulted Lady Brunhilde and ultimately settled on using a style that Lady Rozemyne designed herself, which allows the skirt length and decorations to be easily changed. It is our privilege as Lady Rozemyne's retainers to know how to make such clothes."

Brunhilde had seen me reusing outfits by simply adding cloth and changing the decorations, so with her advice, Leonore had ordered a dress that could easily be altered when the time came.

After our peaceful lunch, Cornelius hurried up to his room; he needed to change out of his sword dancing outfit and into his proper clothes before the graduation ceremony, which meant he didn't have much time. He was ready by the time the other students finished eating and departed for the hall alongside everyone else.

"I shall remain here and read in silence," I said.

"Just don't randomly bless anyone this time..." Sylvester replied.

I nodded in response, assured him that I would be careful, and then got right to reading. As much as I would have rather gone to the library, if anyone spotted me outside the dormitory now, they would realize that I wasn't actually unwell and was skipping the graduation ceremony. I didn't want to risk losing my perfect excuse.

Also staying behind in the dormitory was my regular jailer, Ferdinand. I spoke with him about the magic tools I wanted Raimund to improve while he looked over the documents I had borrowed from Solange.

"Ferdinand, are you familiar with the magic tool this document describes?" I asked.

"I am," he admitted after a pause. "I have a document on it in my laboratory and plan to have Raimund examine it for his next task. As for these"—he gestured to two others—"I am familiar with this one from the library, but not this one. Perhaps it has already broken. It is quite the ordeal to repair a magic tool without the assistance of its creator."

It was rare for one to publicize how a particular magic tool was made—that is, outside of situations where a professor needed to publish their work to continue their research or when someone from the Sovereignty wanted to start selling a tool all throughout the country. As a result, there was often nothing that could be done after its creator died.

"Documents concerning magic tools made by Royal Academy professors are generally passed down to their disciples, while the rest are donated to the library," Ferdinand explained. "Other researchers tend to hide their documentation, however."

"You have tons of secret magic tools, I would guess." I was certain there were a tremendous number he was keeping hidden: dangerous ones, ones he had decided were best not introduced to the world, and ones he had chosen to leave in Hirschur's laboratory.

"Yes, as I determined they were best kept secret. Furthermore, I am told it is difficult for others to use my tools due to the amount of mana they expend. There would not be much point in me introducing tools to the world that most people cannot even use."

"We can just have Raimund modify them. Then, there wouldn't be

any issues with you introducing them,” I said, thinking only that it would be nice for there to be more magic tools in the world, but for some reason, Ferdinand gave me a very confused look.

“And whyever would we do that?”

“I mean, isn’t it obvious? You went out of your way to make them, so could you not use them to better people’s lives? You have a genius mind for these kinds of things, so you might as well improve the world while you’re at it.”

“I cannot say that interests me. I simply make the tools that I wish to make; not once has their potential role in improving the world come to mind. Even if some do end up being useful to others, that is purely coincidence, I can assure you. I have not made and never will make a magic tool with that purpose in mind.”

Ferdinand gave an answer that was very much like him, while Justus gave a wry smile as I stared on in bewilderment. It wasn’t long before our conversation on magic tools resumed, however, and as I was telling Ferdinand about the ones I wanted for the library, the graduation ceremony came to an end.

On the day after the ceremonies, everyone was preparing to return to Ehrenfest. I was given permission to go to the library to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana, so I quickly gathered together Solange’s documents and a large feystone from the necklace Ferdinand had given me, which was filled with mana from my most recent tea party.

Ferdinand was going to be accompanying me today. The public reason was because he was the one who owned the large feystone, but in reality, it was so that he could send ordonnances to those with overdue books. Considering the added possibility that Hildebrand might show up for that very same reason, it wasn’t an option to send me to the library alone.

“I would not need to worry about this if you had not involved the prince in this matter...” Ferdinand muttered.

“My sincerest apologies,” I replied.

I mean, I didn’t think it’d end up being such a big thing...

I pursed my lips as we walked down the central building’s hallway for a bit, then noticed a bunch of highbeasts flying through the air. “Those are black capes,” I said, “so I presume they’re the Sovereign Knight’s Order?”

“There was just a major attack,” Ferdinand noted. “I am sure they have much to do: searching for hidden circumstances, inquiring with various archdukes, carrying out investigations...”

I nodded along to his explanation as we continued toward the library. The walk felt exceptionally long, maybe due to how little

exercise I had been getting lately.

“Professor Solange,” I said. “It’s been a while. I have finally been allowed to come back to the library.”

“Oh my, Lady Rozemyne! And Lord Ferdinand as well,” Solange replied, beckoning us into the reading room with wide eyes. “Welcome, welcome. Schwartz and Weiss told me you were coming”—she gestured to the two shumils with her—“but this is still quite the surprise. It has been so long.”

“Ferdinand forbade me from visiting the library while it was filled with students preparing for their final exams. Cruel, isn’t he?”

Solange laughed off my response and said that he surely had good reason for his concern. Ferdinand merely scoffed in response, bringing our talk on the matter to a swift close. Meanwhile, Schwartz and Weiss were hopping around me, not caring for our conversation at all.

“Milady’s here again.”

“Going to read, milady?”

“I am only here today to provide some of my mana,” I said. “It has become time for me to return to Ehrenfest once again.”

I patted their heads and filled them with mana, all the while allowing them to heal me in turn with their cuteness. Solange took this opportunity to tell me how the Library Committee had functioned in my absence. There had apparently been a few occasions after our tea party when Hildebrand popped in to supply mana, and once more students started coming to the library, Hannelore had taken over.

“Although it seems that more students have attempted to touch Schwartz and Weiss since seeing Lady Hannelore supply them with her mana...” I noted.

“Indeed,” Solange replied. “Since then, the other students have been told that those wearing armbands are special.”

The Library Committee armbands had proven immediately useful. Since we were talking about the third prince and the archduke candidate of a greater duchy, nobody questioned them being special, and it immediately became easier for other students to accept them supplying mana to Schwartz and Weiss.

“So there weren’t any problems, then. That’s a relief. What about the reminder ordonnanzes? Did Prince Hildebrand receive permission from the king in the end?”

“It seems that he asked, only to be told not to leave his room. He apologized by ordonnanz. However, thanks to the reminder ordonnanzes Lord Ferdinand so graciously provided us last year, many more books have been returned this year—so many, in fact, that we need not send any reminders at all. I am truly grateful.”

Upon hearing this, Ferdinand returned a smile. “I do not mean to

force your hand at all,” he said, “but as a show of thanks, would you consider showing us the magic tools here that have stopped working?”

“The magic tools?” Solange repeated, confused.

I showed her the documents she had let me borrow. “These suggest there are plenty of magic tools that could only be used when there were three archnoble librarians in the library. If you don’t mind, would you lend them to us for research purposes? There’s an Ahrensbach apprentice scholar called Raimund who might be able to improve them for us. He’s exceptionally skilled at making tools more mana efficient.”

I wanted to see the magic tools as inspiration for my own creations. Ferdinand wanted to see them, research them, and make them for himself. Raimund wanted new jobs. Solange wanted more magic tools she could run with her own mana, to make her life easier. In other words, this was good for literally everyone involved.

Solange accepted my proposal with a half-smile. “It certainly would be an enormous help if the magic tools required less mana to use.”

“I will summon Raimund, then. He will understand the tools much better once he has seen them in person,” Ferdinand said and immediately produced an ordonnanz.

Raimund must have been in Hirschur’s laboratory, considering how little time passed before he sprinted into the reading room. His clothes were dirty and disheveled; he had evidently been in too much of a rush to tidy himself up.

“Make yourself presentable before leaving the laboratory,” Ferdinand said with a grimace. “You are an eyesore.”

Raimund wasted no time in producing his schtappe, so I reached out to stop him. “Raimund, do *not* cast waschen in the library! You’ll get the books wet!”

“You are the only person who would cast such a sizable waschen...” Ferdinand said with exasperation, but just for safety’s sake, I made Raimund step outside the reading room before he cleaned himself up. From there, we moved to Solange’s office, where she showed us the magic tools that were no longer in use.

“This one here is for cleaning the library, and this one is for quieting loud voices in the reading room,” she explained. Both were convenient to have, but not essential—she could clean the library on her own, even though doing so was far from easy, and everyone knew that being loud in the library was forbidden. Some students even got mad at those who spoke too disruptively. “These you may research as you like.”

“May we borrow them?” Ferdinand asked. “Even if we fail to improve them, I shall fill the tools with mana before returning them,

to make it worth your while.”

Solange gave the less important magic tools to Ferdinand, then looked around the office. “I would not want the magic tools used more regularly to be broken in the process of research, and giving them to you even for a short while would disrupt my work. May I ask that you only look at them?”

“That will suffice,” Raimund said. “It isn’t often that one has the opportunity to see them at all.”

Speaking to Solange like this was a rare opportunity as well, and Raimund started asking all sorts of questions about the magic tools here. Some she could answer, while others went to Ferdinand, who seemed strangely well equipped to respond.

“To improve this one, could we not isolate this part and connect it to this one?” Raimund suggested.

“No, it would be best to first move this part,” Ferdinand replied. “For this one, if we use an ingredient with both Wind and Earth, we can shave this part off entirely.”

Ferdinand and Raimund spoke at length while discussing the immovable magic circles embedded into the library itself. To be honest, I didn’t have a clue what they were saying. I decided to leave them alone and give Solange back the documents she had allowed me to borrow, which Rihyarda was now carrying. Solange, in turn, returned the book of romantic knight stories she had received from us.

“The documents were very useful,” I said. “They spoke of so many magic tools that I would one day like to use in my own library, and it was great fun to read about the daily lives of the librarians.”

“I similarly enjoyed your duchy’s book. The language was clear, and it comes as no surprise that students have taken such a liking to it. Please allow me to borrow another one day.”

As we continued to share our thoughts on the books, a bell rang on the other side of the office door. “Now, who could that be?” Solange wondered aloud. “Now that the graduation ceremony has concluded, I don’t believe I have any arrangements with anyone...”

Solange rang a bell sitting on her own desk, at which point her attendant, who worked in the librarian dormitory, came to open the door for us. Standing on the other side was Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander. He entered the office, fully clad in feystone armor.

“I’m here on behalf of Prince Hildebrand,” he said. “The king and the royal family are remaining in private due to the attack.”

Solange wavered, her eyes wide with surprise. “Oh, but I told Prince Hildebrand that we do not need any reminder ordonnances. You see, so many books were returned this year...”

“Oh, no. That’s not the only reason I’m here. I wanted to ask you more about this ‘forbidden archive’ I’ve been told about. It was

brought up at the tea party the prince attended, but the thing is, I've never heard of it before."

All of a sudden, Ferdinand grabbed Raimund and me by the arms and muttered, "We're leaving." I nodded in response; as much as I wanted to hear more about the forbidden archive, I was a complete outsider. Ferdinand probably didn't want us getting in Raublut and Solange's way.

"The forbidden archive can only be opened with three archnoble librarians gathered together," Solange explained. "The keys are contained in their rooms, which I am unable to enter. I would need to request for new librarians to be sent."

"Hm?" Raublut replied. "I was told only royals could enter it."

"That is something Lady Rozemyne said," Solange noted, drawing me into the conversation just as we were about to say our farewells. "It is an unconfirmed rumor, though."

Raublut turned to look at me, and I immediately twitched. "The Saint of Ehrenfest, hm?" he said, his smile broadening. "Perfect timing. Where did you hear that rumor, Lady Rozemyne?"

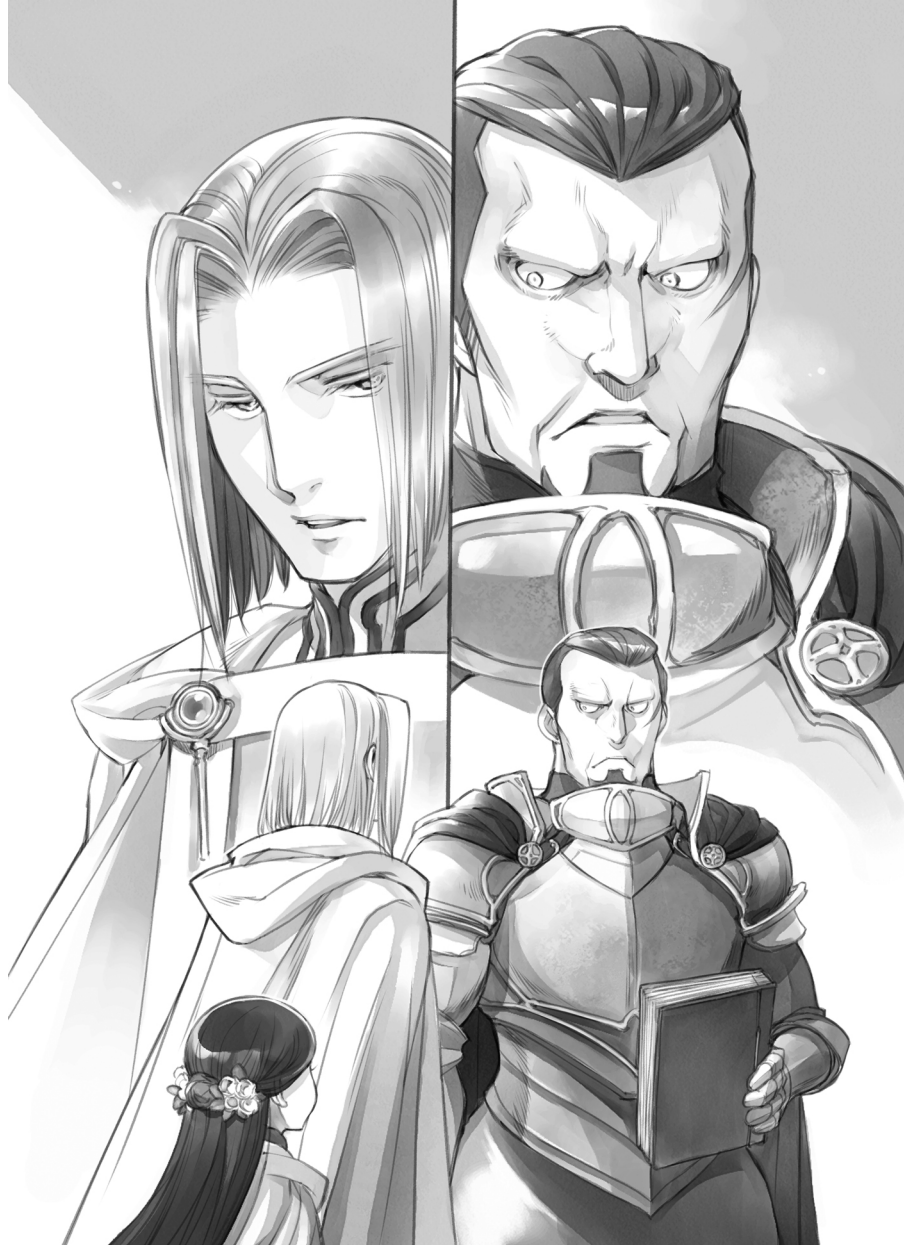
Unable to endure the knight commander's reddish-brown eyes piercing into me, I gulped in fear and moved to hide behind Ferdinand. He most likely knew about the forbidden archive as well, considering that Justus was the one who had told me about it in the first place. I didn't know whether it was something I was meant to have revealed, so I entrusted everything to Ferdinand.

"It is a rumor of unknown origin, commander," Ferdinand said, stepping forward. "However, in the documents Rozemyne recently borrowed from Professor Solange, there was an archive described within that royals specifically came to enter. I do not know whether it exists, or if it could also be entered with the keys Professor Solange speaks of."

Raublut shot Solange a questioning look, and she presented him with the documents I had just returned to her. "These are diaries written by former librarians," she said. "They detail how royals came to the library during the Archduke Conference upon coming of age, as Lord Ferdinand says. If you wish to investigate, please read through these."

Raublut took the documents, nodded, and then gave Ferdinand a close look. "Lord Ferdinand. Do you, a seed of Adalgisa, know nothing of this?"

"No," he replied briskly. "Ehrenfest is my Geduldh."



We said our farewells to Solange and made a swift exit, with Raimund following us out. “Lord Ferdinand, thank you very much for the enjoyable conversation and the task,” he said, then turned right and made for the scholar building. Once he had gone, Ferdinand and I continued walking straight to the central building.

“Ferdinand, could you slow down a little?”

He must not have heard me, as he offered no response and continued walking to the dormitory at a brisk pace. His expression seemed even harder than usual.

“Ferdinand!”

“You walk too slowly.”

“You’re walking too fast! Just what happened back there?”

Ferdinand gave a heavy sigh and scratched at his hair. He looked up at the flying Sovereign knights, then slowly shook his head. “It is nothing.”

So he said, but it was clearly something. He had started acting strangely after our encounter with Raublut, but seeing the Sovereign knight commander couldn’t have been the only reason—after all, they had seen each other during the bible comparison meeting as well.

“Do you think Raimund will finish improving the magic circles by next winter?” I asked. “This is much harder than the previous tasks you gave him, right? Do you think he’ll manage to dissect the tools he’s borrowing?”

My questions received no answers. Ferdinand had slowed down to match my pace, but he was even less talkative than normal. Not even talk of magic tools seemed to get a response from him.

Hey, Ferdinand... What’s a seed of Adalgisa?

And so, my second year at the Royal Academy came to an end. Yet another question was now preying on my mind, but I suspected that I could never in my life ask it, no matter how desperately I wanted to.

Epilogue

The Royal Academy's graduation ceremony came to a close, and the gathered attendees began returning to their respective duchies. It was a busy period during which everyone was packing up and moving their luggage, and as this went on, Eglantine received an urgent summons from her fiancé, Prince Anastasius.

"My sincerest apologies, Lady Eglantine, but as this is a royal matter, we ask that you enter alone," Oswin said when they arrived at Anastasius's villa, speaking as the prince's head attendant. "Your retainers may wait outside."

Something being a "royal matter" in this instance meant it was something not to be shared with the public, so Eglantine's retainers were treated simply as being from Klassenberg and made to wait elsewhere. As someone who was going to be married into the royal family at the end of spring, Eglantine was used to being stealthily summoned when Anastasius determined it was best for her to be updated on affairs.

The aub's probing over dinner tonight is going to be quite intense, I expect...

Aub Klassenberg was still in the dormitory, and as Eglantine had departed, he had sternly reminded her to "act as royalty should." He was the kind of man who wanted to have more intelligence than the other duchies, no matter how minor the facts were or how little time his endeavor left him with. Eglantine felt a little gloomy as she imagined what awaited her upon returning to the dormitory.

"Over here, Eglantine," Anastasius said, gesturing his fiancée over when she arrived at the parlor. His usual sweet smile was nowhere to be seen; instead, the atmosphere was prickly and tense.

Eglantine entered as all of Anastasius's retainers took their leave—sans Oswin, who remained only so that the couple would not be left alone together. Once they were gone, Anastasius silently held out a sound-blocking tool. Eglantine accepted it and said, "You certainly are on guard today..."

"Yes. Because this is about the recent attack."

Eglantine swallowed. As the prince's fiancée, she had experienced the incident that occurred during the Interduchy Tournament's award ceremony firsthand on the stage.

"This won't be announced even during the Archduke Conference,"

Anastasius continued, “so I want you to make sure it doesn’t leak to Klassenberg.”

The recent attack...

Anastasius’s words brought Eglantine back to the moment, and her mind was flooded with images of shouting men with weapons racing toward her on highbeast.

“Kill the false king! The man without a Grutrissheit!”

“You will not!” Anastasius roared, mounting his highbeast while casting the black weapon spell on his morphed schtappe. As he had given up the throne, he had elected to fight back rather than merely be defended.

Eglantine was proud of Anastasius’s decision, but she was also deeply afraid of being left alone. As the prince’s fiancée, she was considered the same as royalty. The terrorists didn’t seem to care that her marriage hadn’t actually taken place yet—they called for her death all the same.

Ternisbefallens that had grown to colossal sizes roared all throughout the arena. The Knight’s Order had taken great lengths to warn everyone that the beasts absorbed mana from attacks, but few listened, and everyone kept attacking them in fear. Eglantine felt like the chaos and disarray were even more terrifying than the ternisbefallens themselves.

“HYAAAAAAH!” came a battle cry from one of the terrorists. The moment Eglantine realized weapons with mana were being directed at her with murderous intent, her breathing quickened, and a sharp pain shot through her chest. Her entire body stiffened as hate-filled eyes bore into her very soul.

“Eglantine! Your geteilt!” Anastasius shouted, prompting Eglantine to cast the shield-making spell with a quavering voice. She evidently had a great deal more mana than her attacker, as his dangerous attack was easily negated, but she couldn’t block their petrifying stares or cruel shouts.

Some of the attackers took their own lives to cause explosions right in front of their targets, some fed themselves to the ternisbefallens to make them grow even larger, and some launched suicidal charges at knights, hoping to take their targets with them. No matter their actions, it was clear that they shared a common mind—carrying out their revenge and nothing else. Their eyes were bloodshot one and all.

Eglantine almost envied their willingness to lose control—she wanted nothing more than to avert her eyes in terror, crouch on the ground, and scream for help. However, those guarded by the Sovereign Knight’s Order were not allowed to reveal such emotions;

the students would never calm if even the royals were panicking. Eglantine swallowed down the bile that had risen in her throat, stood tall, and confidently maintained her geteilt, not wanting to make life harder for the knights. It took her all, but she managed it.

Eglantine looked at Anastasius, holding back the dread-inducing anxiety that made her want to flee the parlor. She smiled, dispelling the images in her head as best she could, and nodded... but unnatural veins were bulging on her hand as she gripped the magic tool much too tightly. It was the only hint at her true feelings, but Anastasius began his report without noticing it.

“The Sovereign Knight’s Order has been investigating the attack nonstop since its occurrence, and the royal family has been holding regular meetings as they receive reports on it,” he said. “However, you are unable to attend those meetings, as you aren’t yet an official member of the royal family.”

“Should you even be telling me these things, then?” Eglantine asked. She didn’t want to remember the attack anyway, so she was unenthusiastic about discussing it, but Anastasius gave a small chuckle.

“Fear not—I will say only that which you ought to know. You would not want to be entirely in the dark when we are starbound at the next Archduke Conference, no? Father has given his permission for me to share some of what was discussed with you.”

It seemed that Eglantine would not be able to escape this without hearing more of the tragic events. She resigned herself to her fate and prompted Anastasius to continue, which he swiftly acknowledged with a nod.

“First, the good news. We’ve captured every single one of the criminals. They all came from fallen duchies, but not all from the same one.”

Fallen duchies were those that had completely dissolved after the king had executed their archducal families. The territory that had formerly been the greater duchy Werkestock had readily been split in two and shared between Dunkelfelger and Ahrensbach. Old Zausengas had now been absorbed into Klassenberg, while Old Trostwerk and Old Scharfer were being managed by the Sovereignty.

“The Sovereignty and the greater duchies manage the fallen duchies,” Eglantine said. “In other words, I suppose we will not be able to demand accountability from anyone.”

It would have been one thing if the rebels had all come from a single fallen duchy, but we couldn’t rebuke every relevant archduke at once. To make matters worse, a king without a Grutrissheit was incapable of redrawing duchy borders.

“We do not wish to cast blame carelessly and have all of the greater duchies abandon the fallen duchies to Sovereign management,” Anastasius said.

Eglantine nodded in agreement, but that meant nobody would be held accountable. Would the victims of the attack be fine with such an outcome? Perhaps their dissatisfaction would even run the risk of creating further rebels. No matter how she considered it, her thoughts were stuck on a dark path.

“However,” the prince continued, “given that ternisbefallens were used in the attack, most are of the opinion that this plot was formed by those of Old Werkestock. As such, some knights are suggesting that Ahrensbach or Dunkelfelger might be behind it.”

Eglantine felt a sudden wave of dizziness sweep over her. It was a tremendous insult to be accused of supporting rebels—so much so that if Aub Klassenberg heard even a word of this suspicion, one could reasonably expect all the accused knights to vanish from Yurgenschmidt overnight. “But why would victorious greater duchies attack the king?” she asked. “If such opinions are vocalized, will we not be making enemies of Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger?”

“We know. The king has shot them all down. However...”

Anastasius fell silent and crossed his arms in thought, most likely debating whether his next words were safe to say. Eglantine waited patiently for him to make his decision.

“We have good reason to believe the Old Werkestock Dormitory’s teleportation circle was used to transport the ternisbefallens.”

Anastasius explained that, before the Interduchy Tournament, a ternisbefallen had appeared in Ehrenfest’s gathering spot. Eglantine knew this already from a report she had received from Klassenberg. She was aware that apprentice knights throughout the Royal Academy were now standing guard at their own duchies’ gathering spots.

“Rauffen led a group of professors to inspect the dormitory, and Gundolf discovered that there were traces of recent use on the teleportation circle,” Anastasius continued. “The plan was for Sigiswald and me to investigate after the Academy term ended, to avoid any unnecessary panic...”

But the attack had taken place before they had the opportunity. Eglantine found that strange; if there had already been so much cause for concern, why had the ternisbefallen attack been enacted so successfully? “Was the Sovereign Knight’s Order not on guard against something of this nature?” she asked.

“They were, of course. They predicted that there might be danger at the Interduchy Tournament, given how many people gather for it, and prepared themselves accordingly. There were guards watching the Old Werkestock Dormitory, more knights assigned to guarding us and

patrolling the arena on the day of, and feybeast-detecting magic tools placed around the knight building.”

Said tools had allowed them to check for anyone trying to sneak the feybeasts in alongside the guardians. The professors and Sovereign Knight’s Order had apparently concluded that any attack could easily be dealt with as long as ternisbefallens weren’t used, and the indications of use on the teleportation circle had only been minor, leaving them to believe that just a few people were going to be involved.

“However, the ternisbefallens appeared from within rather than being brought in from the outside, and there were ten times more rebels than expected,” Anastasius said. “There was no point to the detection magic tools when the feybeasts had already been hidden on the grounds beforehand.”

“They were hidden in the knight building? But how?”

“Potions were used to keep the infant ternisbefallens asleep in mana-blocking bags. Storing them in the knight building ahead of time would be trivial with an accomplice among the students.”

“There’s an accomplice among the students?!” Eglantine exclaimed. All of the attackers had been much older than her; she had never even considered that a student might have been helping them.

“It’s standard procedure for the families of all those involved to be executed alongside the attackers themselves. It makes sense, then, that some students would choose to help their families, having nothing else to lose. We must also consider that these rebels haven’t been hiding somewhere since the civil war ended; they were living normally in the fallen duchies, under the management of the victors. We have even confirmed that they arrived at the Academy through the various duchies’ teleportation circles, attending normally as family of graduating students.”

That was simply impossible for Eglantine to believe. How could they have committed such atrocious acts of violence after living normally for over a decade? She failed to even imagine it.

“The problem is, those we captured weren’t aware of much at all,” the prince said. “This plan was very carefully put together. They had received their orders from those who later committed suicide in a way that left no evidence or memories behind.”

Eglantine clapped her hands over her mouth, recalling those who had blown themselves up or fed themselves to ternisbefallens. She felt as though she was just one lapse of concentration away from vomiting.

“In order to prevent this from happening again, Raublut will be leading a squadron to investigate Old Werkestock’s teleportation circle,” Anastasius concluded. “Their findings are what shall be

announced at the Archduke Conference.”

“Ahrensbach is presently responsible for the circle in question, is it not?”

“It is, and Fraularm has become the subject of much suspicion after she cast waschen during the previous inspection of the old dormitory. Her excuse of there having been too much dust has convinced no one, and that incident will be investigated as well.”

Fraularm’s actions did sound incredibly suspicious, but would a criminal really do something so blatantly obvious? Eglantine felt that even if she were by some chance involved, she would never do anything of the sort.

“Aub Ahrensbach has said that he will cooperate fully in any investigation, including a search of his own duchy,” Anastasius said. It must have been heartening to know that the Sovereign Knight’s Order was working to ensure such a tragedy would never happen again, and Ahrensbach would naturally cooperate to clear the suspicions surrounding it. Eglantine’s tense grip loosened just a little.

“In any case—the casualties,” the prince continued. “Immerdink and Neuehausen suffered the most, as ternisbefallens appeared at the very center of their assigned spots. Several of their students have died.”

Eglantine’s grip tightened again. Knights of the duchies permitted to use black weapons had fought alongside the Sovereign Knight’s Order, and the rebels had been targeting royalty, so she hadn’t expected there to have been so many civilian casualties.

“The ternisbefallen that slew the most Immerdink students was slain in turn by Ehrenfest knights,” Anastasius noted. “Ehrenfest is one of the duchies permitted to use black weapons, and I am told it was Ferdinand who led their efforts.”

“Were there any deaths among those from Ehrenfest?”

“Not one. There was an unusual spherical shield protecting their spot,” he said, but Eglantine failed to understand. She had been up on the arena’s stage; surely she would have noticed something that large. “Some say it was a magic tool belonging to Ferdinand, while others claim it was a divine instrument produced by Rozemyne. We don’t know the truth as of yet, but Ehrenfest suffered no casualties. They had some wounded, but they were all restored with healing magic.”

“I see. That is a relief...” Eglantine replied with a long sigh, having not wanted Rozemyne’s duchy to suffer. Anastasius, in contrast, was wearing a frown.

“The problem is, they suffered so little, some have started to suspect them.”

“For what reason? The rebels were all from fallen duchies, were they not?”

“They were. None were from Ehrenfest,” Anastasius said with a smile that seemed to suggest he would say no more on the matter. Apparently, it was royal business that Eglantine still couldn’t be made privy to. “We are doing all we can. You may rest easy.”

Of course, those noncommittal words weren’t enough to still Eglantine’s restless heart. This was normally when she would smile in return and express her understanding, allowing Anastasius’s words to simply wash over her, but she instead furrowed her brow. She was ashamed to be letting even the smallest amount of displeasure show on her face, but hastily replacing it with a smile would not erase what she had done.

“Eglantine, that expression just now... Is it related to why you seem so unwell...?” Anastasius asked, narrowing his gray eyes as if scrutinizing even the slightest change in her behavior. His response took Eglantine by surprise, but she rested a hand on her cheek and forced a smile.

“Oh my. Do I seem unwell to you? Perhaps I spent too much time in the sun.”

“You would speak like that, after all this time...? Euphemisms fail to convey one’s true intentions, and it was only after Rozemyne urged us to start communicating more directly that we cleared the mistaken air between us, no? I intend to accept every part of you. If there’s anything that you’re worried or concerned about, I want you to tell me,” he said earnestly, extending a hand and placing it over Eglantine’s clenched fist.

Eglantine felt the prince’s warmth and saw his patient eyes, and slowly her anxiety began to ease. In the process, her smile faded and was replaced with a dark expression. “The civil war has not yet ended for me...” she mumbled and then closed her mouth, not yet sure if she could continue. Anastasius made no attempt to hurry her; he patiently waited with his hand on hers. “Shamefully enough, this event has reminded me of the night attack that led to my being sent to Klassenberg in my youth... and ever since, I have found myself unable to sleep.”

“Night attack?” Anastasius repeated, looking confused. It was only then that Eglantine recalled she had not yet told him about it.

“It was when I was young... You recall that my father, the third prince, was assassinated in the midst of the civil war, correct?”

“Yes. His dinner was poisoned. You were the sole survivor, as you ate in your room instead. You had yet to be baptized at the time, so you were adopted by the previous Aub Klassenberg.”

Anastasius knew only the first half of the story and nothing about the night attack. He had been young himself at the time, and his father, the fifth prince, was still refusing any involvement in the civil

war. It was no surprise that Anastasius was unaware; it was possible that only those in Klassenberg knew all the details.

“On the very same night my family was murdered, the villa I was living in came under attack by those exploiting the chaos. Those of the first prince’s faction seemed to think that my father was hiding the Grutrissheit. I remember hearing men shouting at one another to find it.”

Eglantine’s pre-baptismal room had been located in the same area as where her parents lived within their villa. Her nursemaid had noticed the attack, hidden Eglantine among the dressing room shelves, and fled all the way to the Royal Academy to seek help from Klassenberg. Fortunately for her, the aub of the time had come to the Academy dormitory after being informed of the assassination and was able to rally the duchy to save the princess.

However, it wasn’t easy for those of other duchies to enter the villa, meaning the Klassenberg knights faced a problem that the band of Sovereign noble-led attackers hadn’t encountered. Eglantine’s nursemaid had needed to guide them to a door they could enter with Eglantine’s permission, then leave them there as she sought out the princess. She ran through the villa, desperately avoiding the ongoing battles, and asked Eglantine to go on ahead and open the door.

Eglantine had done her best to reach and open the door for her desperate nursemaid, and upon receiving her royal permission, a storm of red-caped knights had flooded into the villa and engaged the attackers.

“The villa was torn to pieces, and so many people died. The attackers, the Sovereign nobles serving in the villa, everyone...” Eglantine said. Her own life had ultimately been saved, but by the time the knights were able to reach her nursemaid, the woman had already perished. “Over ten years have passed since then, and there was another attack just like it. Those who tried to kill us had the same eyes as the attackers of that night. The country may appear to be at peace on the surface, but the war has yet to end.”

“I see. I wasn’t aware of all that...” Anastasius said, stroking his fiancée’s hand ever so tenderly. He didn’t ask for more details or give his own views on the events; he simply made his comforting presence known, easing the painful tension that Eglantine felt writhing within her. A true smile arose on her face.

“I do not wish for there to be another war...”

“I know. You wish for peace. And that is why I ask—will you tell me what manner of peace you seek?”

Eglantine blinked. “Is there more than one kind...?”

“The peace those rebels sought was one with a king other than Father on the throne, no doubt. Is that also what you want?”

Eglantine didn't want that manner of peace in the least—she wanted the opposite, if anything. She closed her eyes in search of what she truly wished for and muttered, “The manner of peace I seek...”

She wanted the civil war to end in a true sense—for Yurgenschmidt to be ruled by a proper king whose position had no weaknesses for any rebels to exploit. Her dream was for a world where blood wasn't forever being spilled.

The Grutrissheit...

If the current king could acquire this proof of worthiness that had been lost during the civil war, none would be able to oppose his reign, and half of the problems facing the Yurgenschmidt nobles of their time would vanish in an instant. She passionately wished for the Grutrissheit to return and bring about the true peace she sought.

Eglantine opened her eyes, having found the answer she was looking for. “So?” Anastasius prompted. “Just what manner of peace do you seek?”

“An end to the civil war. A peace I can believe in, where blood will not once again be used to wash away blood,” Eglantine replied and then eyed Anastasius in silence. Was it really safe for her to voice her true thoughts? She looked at their hands, which were still together; he was the only one who could hear her, thanks to the magic tools.

Was saying any more on the subject really wise? Would the prince still accept her after she revealed all to him? Perhaps it was best to prioritize noble speech, with the understanding that he would embrace everything. Eglantine made her conclusion after a moment's hesitation—if she tested his sincerity here, it would most likely inform her future decision-making.

“I strongly wish for the Grutrissheit to be obtained without conflict, and for a legitimate king to be born through its guidance,” she said, her bright orange eyes shining with resolve as the prince's gray ones strove to determine her true intent. The silence that followed was only momentary, but to Eglantine, it felt like an eternity.

“Understood,” Anastasius said. “You will not be dragged into any conflict. I will exert all my power and sacrifice all else to protect you and search for the Grutrissheit.” There was an unmistakable kindness in his eyes, and his smile made it immediately clear that his words were true—that he would accept Eglantine in her entirety while staying firmly by her side.

Eglantine had known that Anastasius loved her, but for the first time, she felt as if she understood just how deep those feelings ran. Her hand suddenly felt unusually hot beneath his, and she was struck with a timidity that made her want to retreat into herself. The heat

quickly spread, and soon enough, her chest and cheeks were burning too.

“Erm, Prince Anastasius...” she began, attempting to pull her hand back, but Anastasius tightened his grip in response. She wasn’t confident that she could maintain her composure if she looked him in the eye, so she instead gazed downward.

“Such is my promise to you, my Goddess of Light,” Anastasius said. There was a quiet clatter as he allowed his magic tool to drop to the floor and used his now free hand to reach lovingly for Eglantine’s hair.

“Lord Anastasius! This is not the proper place for...” she began, but her protests fell on veritably deaf ears. He could not hear her without the tool, and just as she began to feel panic at the lack of communication...

“Ahem!”

Oswin suddenly cleared his throat. He had completely faded into the background, but he put a swift end to their conversation before the prince could say or do anything more.

Speaking at the Gazebo

It was the Earthday right after Lady Rozemyne returned to Ehrenfest, and in a meeting room in the scholar building was a gathering of apprentice archscholars from all duchies ranked tenth and above. Naturally, this was where her sudden absence would receive the most attention, as she was the starter of so many trends.

“Pardon?” I asked. “Lady Rozemyne has already returned to her duchy?”

“Yes, because she collapsed twice in quick succession. It was the archduke himself who summoned her back,” Hartmut informed those who had gathered for the meeting, looking slightly concerned.

I had seen Lady Rozemyne collapse myself while attending a tea party with Lady Hannelore, and I also knew that a prince had been in attendance. I was here at this information-exchange meeting in the hope of asking how Lady Rozemyne was doing, but it seemed that Hartmut was carefully controlling how much was known. He intended to publicize nothing more than the fact she had returned to Ehrenfest due to poor health, as she had done last year.

But will everyone be satisfied with that, I wonder?

Lady Rozemyne was the source of so many Ehrenfest trends, and all talk of them being mere fads had soon disappeared when her duchy formed trade deals with Klassenberg and the Sovereignty. Furthermore, while the only new foods they were serving at tea parties were sweets, those invited to Ehrenfest meals at the Archduke Conference were said to have been shocked by the enticing dishes they were offered.

As a result, Ehrenfest’s rank had risen dramatically, and the top-ranking duchies who had failed to secure trade deals with them were now striving to at least establish connections. Most had rarely socialized with Ehrenfest due to its neutrality during the civil war, but now it was getting closer and closer to the Sovereignty, and many wanted to learn as much as they could about Lady Rozemyne, the one responsible for this abrupt shift. I observed my surroundings, wondering whether I should reveal the information that only Dunkelfelger knew.

“Do we know whether Lady Rozemyne will miss the Interduchy Tournament again this year?” an apprentice archscholar asked.

“It will depend on what her doctor and the aub decide,” Hartmut

replied. "As her retainer, I do hope for her prompt and safe return, but..."

"There is no need to fret," Marianne noted. "Lady Charlotte is in attendance this year, so our socializing will not be interrupted."

"Lord Wilfried is expected to deal with the male socializing while Lady Charlotte takes care of the female socializing. Aub Ehrenfest has ordered us all to be very proactive with spreading trends," came a third voice.

Hartmut had trailed off, but these other apprentice archscholars took that opportunity to assure everyone that Ehrenfest's socializing would proceed just fine even without Lady Rozemyne. Their phrasing did come across as somewhat rude, but perhaps that was intentional misdirection to hide her relationship with Prince Hildebrand.

Perhaps it would be best for me to arrange a private meeting with Hartmut to ask for details about Lady Rozemyne.

I had already known about her leaving due to the message she had sent Lady Hannelore beforehand, but I didn't even have a scrap of information about how she was doing. Hartmut was so distracted with preparing for his lady's return that his responses by ordonnanz were all very brief.

If only I were Lady Rozemyne's retainer... I wouldn't need to spend each day so miserable and anxious.

"Lady Clarissa of Dunkelfelger. There is something I wish to report to you personally. May I have a moment of your time?"

Hartmut addressed me with a smile following the meeting's conclusion. His politeness was natural for a noble from a bottom-ranking duchy speaking to a noble from a top-ranking one in public.

But not so natural for a man speaking to his betrothed...

From my perspective as someone who had finally completed the marriage challenges given to me, I found the way he spoke to and acted around me much too distant. There were many from other duchies who wished to copy the movements of the top-ranking duchies and socialize with Ehrenfest, and as such, a great number of apprentice archscholars who had attended our meeting were seeking to have Hartmut escort them as a quick path to success.

Too bad for all of you, though. He's chosen me, so there's no point trying to get him now.

That said, I couldn't afford to let my guard down before he formally introduced me to Lady Rozemyne. I glanced around, then approached Hartmut and gave a warm smile that made our close relationship more apparent.

"My, my, Hartmut..." I said. "The meeting has ended, so you may refer to me as just 'Clarissa' now. If you have the time, let us go to a

gazebo as an engaged couple should.”

Voicing the facts that we were engaged and could spend time in the gazebos for lovers would surely drive away the women attempting to flock to Hartmut. Any who still tried to approach him after such a clear vocal warning would swiftly be struck down, as was the usual response for a woman of Dunkelfelger.

“Clarissa, then,” Hartmut replied. He had paused to think while I smiled at the girls around us, a daring fire blazing in my eyes, and ultimately decided it was most wise to adjust his speech as I requested. “Let’s meet at third bell, on Winday. You know my highbeast, right?”

Winday was a weekday when classes were normally held. In other words, we were demonstrating how close we were—that we knew how each other’s studies were going so well that we had no reason to hesitate. I appreciated that he had picked up on my intention to make our relationship clear... but that didn’t explain how he knew which days I was no longer attending lessons on.

Although I felt confused and a little creeped out, I nodded with a smile. “Yes, let’s. It shall be a wonderful time.”

On the scheduled Winday, I started toward the gazebos with a get-well gift for Lady Rozemyne in my arms. I advanced through the central building and then the scholar building on my way outside, and soon enough, the snow all around me vanished, much like when one entered a duchy’s gathering spot. Beyond the herb gardens tended to by the professors were flower gardens containing several white gazebos. It was a vibrant area that was very popular for lovers’ meetups, especially when the Royal Academy’s grounds were otherwise engulfed in dull, colorless snow.

“I wonder which gazebo has Hartmut’s highbeast...” I mused aloud, scanning my surroundings as I rode through the gardens on my own highbeast. I took to the air for a better look.

These gazebos will probably get even busier once Ehrenfest’s Royal Academy Love Stories becomes popular with the other duchies too.

Most students were still occupied with their classes, so there were few gazebos with highbeasts near them. Hartmut’s was very easy to spot as a result, and I descended toward it.

“Oh?”

Despite the gazebos being a place for lovers to meet, I could see three figures with Ehrenfest capes. Hartmut was sitting and reading some documents, while the younger boy and girl with him were anxiously looking around as though feeling very out of place. I recognized the girl as Philine, one of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers, but who was the boy?

“Your partner is here, Hartmut,” Philine said, regarding me nervously. Hartmut looked up from his documents, then gestured me over.

“Might be out of taste to bring third parties to the gazebo,” he said, “but my main goal today is to introduce them to you. Hope you can forgive me.”

“I, too, suggested the gazebos with something else in mind, so it doesn’t bother me if other, relevant people are also here. However”—I turned to Philine and the unknown boy—“I see the two of you are feeling very unsure about this. Please rest easy.”

I set down my things and smiled at them. The only Ehrenfest people Hartmut would think to introduce me to were retainers serving Lady Rozemyne, and making the best possible impression on my future coworkers was an important step toward achieving my aim of one day serving alongside them.

“Clarissa, this is Philine,” Hartmut said. “She’s an apprentice layscholar serving Lady Rozemyne. I’d imagine you know her from how she gathers stories from other duchies in the library.”

“Yes, of course. It is rare for a laynoble to be selected to serve an archducal family. She must be an exceptionally talented apprentice scholar,” I said. It was for precisely these reasons that I had taken a particular interest in her while investigating Lady Rozemyne and her retainers.

Hartmut crossed his arms. “Philine believed in Lady Rozemyne’s promise and kept her own while Lady Rozemyne was unconscious. Her faith is so splendid that, even during those two uncertain years, she gathered story after story. It comes as little wonder that Lady Rozemyne strongly wished for her to be taken as a retainer.”

I understood just how long two years seemed to a child. And with Lady Rozemyne spending that time in a jureve, there had even been a constant risk that she might die outright or never come back at all. Philine’s resolve to continue believing in her promise with Lady Rozemyne and gathering stories for two years amid all the naysayers truly was splendid.

“The boy is Roderick,” Hartmut continued. “He is a medscholar who will soon be taken in as a retainer due to his talent for writing new stories.”

I’m so envious! Geez!

Just the thought of writing new stories to present to Lady Rozemyne made my heart throb. I had hoped to offer stories of my own in the process of completing Hartmut’s marriage challenges, but I had quickly learned that I didn’t possess the talent for it myself. Instead, I had needed to resort to transcribing Dunkelfelger books and collecting knight stories. Seeing these two young and very talented

people made me feel anxious and worried.

I wonder, am I even going to meet Lady Rozemyne's standards?

"This is Clarissa," Hartmut said. "She is an archscholar from Dunkelfelger, and the woman I shall escort during my graduation. I intend to introduce her to Lady Rozemyne at the Interduchy Tournament."

"My. You don't intend to introduce me as your fiancée?"

"Our engagement isn't official yet. We can hardly call ourselves engaged before our parents have met, can we?"

Hartmut had seemed to be quite the playboy, involving himself with girls from all sorts of duchies, but he was evidently still quite diligent on the inside. Enjoying this new discovery, I looked toward the two apprentice scholars. "And yet, you're going out of your way to introduce me to these two before the Interduchy Tournament. I must wonder, what might be the significance of that?"

"I intend to ask you to gather intelligence in my stead next year at the Royal Academy."

"Oh my. Intelligence?"

One important job for apprentice scholars was to socialize with various apprentice scholars of other duchies to gather intelligence and discover the truth behind rumors, but I was from another duchy—whyever would he make such a request of me?

"Roderick's a mednoble, Philine's a laynoble, and while they're both skilled at writing and gathering stories for Lady Rozemyne, they lack the skills actually required of a retainer. Thus, it's highly likely that Lady Rozemyne will struggle to learn things shared between apprentice archscholars once I graduate."

I took a moment to digest his words. In short, Lady Rozemyne wasn't going to have any apprentice archscholars next year. I might have been engaged to Hartmut, but for him to make such a request of someone from another duchy was still unusual. Perhaps he wasn't well-connected with Lord Wilfried's and Lady Charlotte's retainers, who had been attending the meeting for apprentice archscholars. Or perhaps he didn't trust their intelligence-gathering skills either.

"I will do anything for Lady Rozemyne's sake," I said. "However, is there perhaps something in this for me?" Hartmut obviously had some kind of reward ready, but with third parties here, it was important to establish a verbal agreement.

Hartmut looked at me through narrowed, orange eyes. "How about this? First of all, cordial relationships with Lady Rozemyne's retainers. I intend to introduce you to her apprentice archknights and attendants at a later date too. Naturally, it's down to you to make things work from there, but the opportunity exists."

"Oh my. Do you think I would ever fail you?"

“No. Do you think I would ever waste my time with someone who would fail despite me having planned so far ahead for them?”

“Planned ahead, hm? If all of your preparations to make me Lady Rozemyne’s retainer are complete, you must have revealed everything I know to your fellow retainers.”

“Trying to get Lady Rozemyne to take a retainer she doesn’t know by name or appearance would be as hard as getting Ewigeliebe to look at any goddess but Geduldh,” Hartmut noted. We were smiling at each other, but there was a pleasant tension between us—the kind that arose when two people tried to squeeze out as much information and the best terms from one another. It seemed that we were the only ones enjoying our scholarly exchange, though.

“E-Erm, if you would mind please calming down...” Philine interjected, leaning forward and attempting to mediate. Roderick was just letting his eyes wander, trying to maintain neutrality.

“Oh, but we are delightfully calm,” I said. “Is that not so, Hartmut?”

“Indeed. Is that not how it appears on the outside?”

Their innocent reactions were cute, but these two weren’t at all suited to being information-gathering scholars—this much was clear to me already, even though we hadn’t spent even a bell together. If these were the best apprentice scholars Hartmut was able to introduce me to, then his situation truly must have been unfortunate. I was losing all confidence in my understanding of what Lady Rozemyne wanted from a retainer.

“Hartmut,” I said, “why do you say that becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainer is difficult?”

The retainers of a duchy’s archducal family were normally chosen based on recommendations from one’s parents and grandparents, as well as already existing retainers and members of the same faction. Retainers with partners marrying into their duchy would similarly recommend their betrothed, which was why I had thought that Hartmut putting my name forward would be enough for Lady Rozemyne to accept me after my marriage.

“Would it be hard to recommend me, even though you are her only apprentice archscholar?” I asked, swallowing hard as my plans seemed to come apart at the seams. I rested a hand on my cheek and gave a rigid smile, trying to hide my panic. My assumption had been that my becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainer was near enough guaranteed—that is, unless it came to be that Hartmut was an extremely untrustworthy individual. “Ah! Could it be that... Lady Rozemyne doesn’t trust you?”

All expression disappeared from Hartmut’s face. He folded his arms, crossed his legs, and turned to the two students sitting across

from him. “Philine, Roderick. Could you tell Clarissa whether I am trusted or not?” he asked, looking equally as blank as before. They both went pale, despite not having been yelled at, and started praising him with tearful eyes.

“Hartmut is incredible, Lady Clarissa!” Philine exclaimed. “Um... Even the temple gray priests respect him, and he knows everything about Lady Rozemyne. He’s also a very fast worker—so fast, in fact, that even Lord Ferdinand praises him!”

“He has high standards for others,” Roderick added with equal enthusiasm, “but that’s because he meets those standards himself! Naturally, Lady Rozemyne recognizes his talents! Er... I think!”

They sounded so desperate that I started to feel a little bad for them. There was no doubting how competent Hartmut was, especially with how skillfully he navigated the apprentice archscholar meetings. As someone who was planning to marry a person of a lower-ranked duchy, I was comfortable saying that I understood this better than most.

“But talent and trust are two separate things, are they not?” I asked. “Otherwise, there’s no way that Hartmut’s recommendation wouldn’t be enough.”

“Well, Lady Rozemyne is an unusual case,” Hartmut said.

“I’m well aware. She used unthinkable plots in ditter, started several trends, was accepted as the master of the library’s magic tools, contributed significantly to Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine getting engaged, and even healed her gathering spot after the ternisbefallen attack. She is the Saint of Ehrenfest, no?”

Hartmut nodded repeatedly, saying that was exactly right, then let out a sigh. “Lady Rozemyne was raised in the temple; her perspective is fundamentally different from that of a regular noble and she chooses her retainers on another basis entirely. Just look at Roderick. He wasn’t recommended by her family or retainers—in fact, everyone spoke out against him. He’s of a low status and from another faction, and when judged as a retainer of an archducal family member, he’s downright incompetent. But Lady Rozemyne has high praise for his writing skills, and after paying a heavy price, he was taken as a retainer anyway.”

Roderick shrunk back at Hartmut’s harsh tone, but the fact that he didn’t protest indicated that it was all true. Philine had simply been looking at him with worry, but she used this opportunity to smile and interject. “A simple recommendation will not be enough to guarantee one’s assignment,” she said. “After all... Lady Rozemyne did suffer the Lord Traugott incident just recently.”

“Traugott is the guard knight who held everyone back during last year’s treasure-stealing ditter game, correct?” I asked. In Dunkelfelger,

disobeying an order was enough to get one banned from ever playing ditter again. To see an apprentice knight act so foolishly was surprising enough, but hearing that he was also Lady Rozemyne's retainer had made me so furious that I committed his name to memory.

"He is a guard knight no longer," Philine said and explained to me what had happened. Traugott had actively requested to become a guard knight with his grandmother's recommendation, but in truth, he had no intention of serving a weak lady and planned to quit as soon as he accomplished his goals. He had subsequently been relieved of duty, and the whole experience had wounded Lady Rozemyne's trust for new retainers. As she had made no attempt to hire any new guard knights since, it was hard for those around her to recommend anyone from their family.

So he not only dragged the others down in ditter, but he also quit for such a selfish reason and even impeded my aim to become a retainer?! Traugott must pay!

"Not to mention," Hartmut added, "I expect that Lord Ferdinand will reject anyone he doesn't deem valuable to the duchy."

"My apologies," I said. "I did not think things through enough... Lady Rozemyne's guardian can speak on her choice of retainer, even though she is already in the Royal Academy? Not even her adoptive mother and father can interfere, but he can? Is that allowed in Ehrenfest?"

Archduke candidates were normally closer to their retainers than anyone else, so it was generally up to them to choose who they took into their service. My initial assumption had been that Lady Rozemyne was too strong-willed to accept anyone's introductions, but now Hartmut was saying her guardian had final authority. I couldn't understand what in the world was going on.

"Lady Rozemyne spends much time in the temple, so Lord Ferdinand will refuse anyone who does not respect the gray priests who keep it organized and the lower city commoners who assist with her trend-making. Not even close family are exceptions to this rule. Lord Ferdinand is her guardian in the temple, her skilled teacher, her apothecary, and her doctor. By and large, he has more authority over her than her adoptive parents."

He had explained that it wasn't Ehrenfest that was weird; it was just Lady Rozemyne. This certainly was valuable information for anyone who wished to be her retainer. I had no idea that marrying Hartmut would be the beginning of my work, not the end.

"She is so unusual that planning or predicting anything seems impossible..." I said, holding my head to endure the psychological damage I was experiencing.

Philine peered at me, her grass-green eyes rich with worry. "Erm, Hartmut... What can we do to help Lady Clarissa join us as retainers?" she asked. "She is willing to gather intelligence for Lady Rozemyne, so I would like for her wish to come true."

I could only blink in surprise. Apprentice scholars were known for lying to each other's faces with a smile while gathering intelligence, so Philine's honesty had caught me off guard. My shock must have been apparent, as Hartmut gave me a knowing smile.

"The first thing we can do is make her known to Lady Rozemyne," he said. "Clarissa, it's much harder than you think for someone from another duchy to become Lady Rozemyne's retainer. It'll be a long and painful road. Do you want to give up?"

My heart roared with determination. "Never. My resolve isn't so flimsy—the stronger my foe, the brighter it burns. I will smash every obstacle that stands in my way."

"I thought you'd say that," Hartmut replied with a chuckle. He had doubtless predicted that I would go along with his plan.

"Philine, Roderick, do trust next year's intelligence gathering to me," I said with a smile as I started preparing to leave. "I will leak to you all the information that Dunkelfelger's apprentice archscholars gather. In return, do tell Lady Rozemyne that it is all coming from me."

"Understood. We look forward to working with you, Lady Clarissa."

After securing Philine and Roderick's support, I proffered a bundle of papers to Hartmut. "As a get-well gift, I wish to give Lady Rozemyne these Dunkelfelger stories that I gathered. Please deliver them to her in Ehrenfest while emphasizing that it was I who provided them. We must first start with her learning my name."

"You got more than you needed for your marriage challenges? Hm... I might need to reevaluate my opinion of you..." Hartmut said and reached for the papers with an impressed look. I had not stopped at the transcriptions required for my marriage; I also had some ready to bring with me when I was introduced to her.

I can do this. I will do this. I'm going to become Lady Rozemyne's retainer, no matter what.

"Okay. That settles that. Let's go." Hartmut stood and extended a helping hand to me, only for Philine to tug on his cape.

"Erm, Hartmut... Roderick and I can go now, but as this is the Goddess of Time's gazebo, perhaps you and Lady Clarissa could stay here until fourth bell...?"

Hartmut looked down at Philine, who was doing her best to be considerate and helpful despite being too young to really understand school romance, and spent a moment in contemplation. "Clarissa, is

there anything we have to talk about?" he asked.

"Lady Rozemyne's condition, the temple's circumstances, her guardians, the various miracles she has caused..." I replied, counting each of my answers off on my fingers. "I have a mountain of questions for my God of Darkness."

Philine and Roderick looked absolutely horrified. I had no idea what had caught them so off guard, but unlike them, I was starved for information on Lady Rozemyne.

"I came all this way to meet you, Hartmut, and yet we have barely discussed Lady Rozemyne herself. Do not think I am a woman who would be satisfied with so little..." I continued, taking Hartmut's outstretched hand and sweetly pulling him back down into his seat.

"In that case, let's talk about how saintly Lady Rozemyne was in her youth, shall we?" Hartmut said after considering my proposal. "My Goddess of Light."

"My God of Darkness truly knows such wondrous tales. Do continue."

Philine and Roderick fled from the gazebo, and I got to hear stories singing Lady Rozemyne's praises all the way until fourth bell. The Goddess of Time must have been playing her tricks, much like the rumors warned, as our time together seemed to run out in the blink of an eye.

Rendezvous at the Gazebo

“I will study in my room so that I may finish my classes as soon as possible. After all, I will need to help Lady Charlotte with her socializing,” Brunhilde said.

“And I will similarly prepare for this afternoon’s practical lesson,” Philine said as well.

After seeing Lady Rozemyne off, we retainers went back to our respective rooms. I started climbing the dormitory stairs, only for Hartmut to call out to me.

“Leonore, you’re free at the moment, right?”

“I intend to spend this time researching feybeasts and their weaknesses in preparation for the upcoming Interduchy Tournament, so I will not help train or gather materials for Roderick,” I replied, already sure of what he was going to ask. “If you have determined that he is useless and are facing a shortage of manpower as a result, convince Lady Rozemyne to take another apprentice scholar in his place.”

I understood that Hartmut was extremely busy and struggling with his duties, but I was a guard knight. I was not about to do scholar work unless Lady Rozemyne personally ordered it.

“So harsh, Leonore. If only you could be kind to someone other than Cornelius...”

“Agreeing to help you even a single time will only lead to you seeking my assistance on a regular basis,” I said tersely. Again, I turned to leave, but then I heard someone calling my name from nearby. It was Cornelius, who I had thought had returned to Ehrenfest with Lady Rozemyne, and he was walking over in quite a hurry. “You certainly came back quickly. You did say that you would, but given your guard duty and the necessity to report on what took place here at the Academy, I thought you would be gone until at least tomorrow.”

“We’re talking about Cornelius here,” Hartmut said with a laugh. “I imagine Lady Elvira was there to welcome Lady Rozemyne and wasted no time before antagonizing him with questions, causing him to turn tail and run right back here.”

Cornelius grimaced, showing that Hartmut was entirely right with his guess. I gave a sympathetic smile and said, “I do understand how you feel, Cornelius. I would wish to run as well.”

Back when we had informed Lady Elvira that Cornelius had

chosen to escort me at his graduation, her dark eyes had gleamed, and she had probed me relentlessly about our romance. The unexpected intensity of her questions had been overwhelming, especially when I couldn't answer them due to my oaths of secrecy with Cornelius.

"Mother certainly is a pain, but this is my last year at the Royal Academy," Cornelius said. "There shouldn't be anything odd about me wanting to stay here as long as I can. For the memories."

"I see, I see," Hartmut interjected. "You want to flirt with Leonore as much as you can, since you don't have as much guard duty in the Royal Academy."

I shot him a cold glare. "Hartmut, are you not embarrassed to be throwing such a misdirected tantrum? I suggest erring on the side of silence." He was probably getting revenge for my refusal to help him just now.

"I'll take my leave for now," Hartmut replied with a shrug and started upstairs. "Don't want Leonore holding a grudge or anything. Have fun, you two."

That last line was unnecessary...

As I glared at the swiftly retreating Hartmut, Cornelius extended a hand to me with a conflicted smile. "For you to be so annoyed right now, you must really hate spending time with me."

After glancing around and confirming that nobody was within eyesight, I rested my hands atop his. "I dislike those who taunt us as Hartmut does, but I am glad to have more time to spend with you, Cornelius. Please do not tease me when you know how I feel."

Cornelius leisurely escorted me up the stairs. Lady Rozemyne had fewer guards in the Royal Academy than in the castle, so we normally had very little time to spend alone together. Simply walking with him was enough to make a pleasant warmth spread through my chest and a smile play on my lips.

"I feel the same way," Cornelius said. "We only have until classes end; let's spend as much time together as we can before Rozemyne returns. Luckily, we've already finished most of our classes to accommodate her library-going."

Even if there were group gathering and ditter training sessions on Earthday, we had plenty of time we could spend alone together. And the time we had previously spent accompanying Lady Rozemyne to the library as guards was also vacant; we retainers could use it as we liked.

"Leonore, you don't have classes today, right?" Cornelius asked. "Is there somewhere in particular you want to go?"

"Anywhere will do, as long as we are together. Perhaps we could use this opportunity to learn from *Royal Academy Love Stories*?"

"We're going to end up becoming material for Mother and

everyone else, you know..." Cornelius said with a grimace. I couldn't help but smile in response; his attempts to escape from Lady Elvira's probing seemed more adorable than manly to me.

"Although I would not like to be used as material myself," I replied, "the stories Lady Elvira writes truly are wonderful."

"I am aware that women love them. I guess you do too, Leonore?"

"Just reading them, that is."

"I think most men would be a little uncomfortable if you asked them to act based on those stories..." Cornelius muttered. He held my hand and guided me out of the dormitory, complaining about how fictitious such love stories were all the while, and together we started down a hallway in the central building.

"Even we women understand that such ideal stories cannot be recreated perfectly in the real world. I, for one, would not like to be held to the standards of the ladies who feature in them," I replied. *Royal Academy Love Stories* described actual romances in the most beautified way imaginable. They were quite extreme at times, so it was easy to understand not wanting to be compared to them.

Cornelius suddenly paused and examined me carefully. "You consider those stories the ideal, but you don't actually expect them to become reality..." he said. "That's the first time I've heard an opinion like that."

"Saying it so bluntly is far from romantic, so I imagine most women keep such thoughts locked away inside of them."

I was often told that I was too straightforward, and that my cold observations weren't cute at all, but my tongue had slipped yet again. Despite my efforts to act at least a bit cuter around Cornelius, I always ended up blundering somehow. It was so upsetting that I started walking a half step behind him. I would have liked to distance myself even more, as I was in deep self-reflection, but this was as far as I could go while our fingers were still entwined.

If only I were as innocently adorable as Judithe or Philine. Maybe then Cornelius would think I'm cute, even if only a little.

"I do think you're cute," Cornelius suddenly announced.

"Excuse me?"

"It's cute how you admire love stories, even while saying they're unrealistic."

In an instant, I felt all of my mana coursing through my body; my cheeks flushed, and I was struck with an urge to flee out of embarrassment. There were metaphors in *Royal Academy Love Stories* about a Goddess of Spring wanting to hide from the God of Far-Sight, and they all suited me perfectly at this moment.

"A-As I've said...!" I stammered. "Erm... I do not know how to reply to things like that. Please do not say them with such a serious

face.”

Cornelius brushed off my protests with a smile and opened a door in the central building that led directly outside. He descended the snowy stairs, then formed his highbeast. I moved to do the same, but he stopped me with a half-smile. “You don’t need yours, Leonore. Ride mine.”

“Hold on just a moment... Riding double?!”

Cornelius and I were already set on choosing one another for the graduation ceremony escort, so there would be nothing shameful about us being seen riding together. Incidentally, it was considered very problematic for members of the opposite sex to ride atop the same highbeast—that is, unless they were lovers or children—but that was not my concern here. I had not ridden alongside any man before, much less the one with whom I was in love, so I had no idea how to behave or what to do.

“If you don’t want to, I won’t make you...” Cornelius said.

“I don’t *not* want to. I just... need time to prepare my heart.”

“Alright. Could you do that later, then?”

As expected, Cornelius once again brushed off my protests with a smile. By the time I knew what was happening, I was atop his highbeast.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Naturally, as we were riding in tandem, his voice was much too close. My head started to spin, and I found it impossible to sit straight. Perhaps the cold air and piled-up snow intensified Cornelius’s warmth, and the feeling of it against my back made it impossible for me to calm down.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I was thinking we should take a page from *Royal Academy Love Stories* and go to the gazebo where the Goddess of Time plays her tricks,” he replied.

It seemed that Cornelius had indeed read the book, despite all his complaints about Lady Elvira. His right hand gripped the reins, while his left held me securely in place. This had happened in the stories as well, and it was entirely like being embraced. The problem was that I was barely calm enough to entrust my body to him while feeling as the Goddess of Spring did while she whirled along.

I should have been studying Royal Academy Love Stories, not the feybeast encyclopedias!

I had thought that Cornelius had selected me because my province, status, and faction made me the optimal choice, and that even if we were on good terms as coworkers, there would never be true romance between us. The idea that we might one day be riding to a gazebo like this had not once crossed my mind.

Cornelius truly does excel at surprise attacks...

As I remembered, it had been the end of summer, at the time of the summer coming-of-age and the autumn baptism ceremonies. Lady Rozemyne was spending her days in the temple in preparation, and while she was absent, her female retainers were pouring their all into embroidering Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits.

By chance, it was on that particular day that Lady Rozemyne's attendants were changing her room's decor to suit the upcoming season. Judithe had practice, and Philine was helping at the temple, so I was the only one embroidering in the retainer room.

"Leonore, is Rihyarda here?" Cornelius asked, having suddenly appeared in the entryway.

I glanced at the door leading to Lady Rozemyne's room and said, "She is decorating right now, so I expect she will shoo you away unless your business is particularly urgent." Rihyarda was enthused about finishing the task as quickly as possible.

Cornelius must have found it easy to imagine her reaction and seated himself with a smile. "Guess I should wait until she's calmed down a bit. She should take a break at fifth bell, right?"

"Yes, I imagine so," I replied, confident that even Rihyarda would give herself some time to rest, and then returned to my embroidery. I wanted to use this rare opportunity to speak with Cornelius, but no suitable topics came to mind.

Have you decided who you're going to be escorting...?

I was extremely concerned about the answer to that question, but I had heard that Cornelius was already fed up with Lady Elvira asking him about such matters. The last thing I wanted was to make the silence even more unbearable. At times when we were working together, we would often speak of our guard knight duties, but we had nothing to talk about when Lady Rozemyne was absent.

Perhaps I could discuss Lord Bonifatius's training... Or would that be too sudden?

I silently continued my work, trying to think of something to say.

"This embroidery sure seems finicky. I see why Lady Rozemyne did everything she could to avoid it..." came an impressed voice. I looked up and realized that Cornelius had been watching my hands the whole time—and now that I knew his eyes were on me, my fingertips began to tremble.

"Lieseleta is the skilled embroiderer, not I. She excels at precise work and would more than happily embroider forever. Not only has she finished the task she was assigned, but she has also started embroidering Lady Rozemyne's new outfit. Her intention is to make the hem match the designs on Schwartz's and Weiss's clothes."

“Right...”

Lieseleta's love of shumils was common knowledge among her fellow retainers. She thought she was successfully hiding it from Lady Rozemyne, but I was certain she had long since been discovered.

“So, the girls are splitting the embroidery up... Does that mean Angelica's participating?” Cornelius asked, seeming extremely concerned. He was probably thinking back to the suffering he had experienced as part of the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron. That, or he harbored feelings of undying love for her, despite her having become engaged to Lord Eckhart.

“This may surprise you, Cornelius, but Angelica has a talent for embroidery.”

“No way.”

“It is true. She agreed to help as long as Lord Ferdinand gave her permission to embroider the magic circles into her own cape as well. She said that she would spare no effort when it came to powering up her equipment.”

“I wish she had shown that much initiative with her studies...” Cornelius said and gave an exaggerated sigh. I wished that I could sigh as well; he seemed to get quite talkative when the subject turned to Angelica, but that just made me depressed.

Once again, we fell into an uncomfortable silence. It seemed as though we were both eyeing one another, but neither of us could speak. Our standoff continued, broken only by the occasional faint sound of my thread passing through cloth—that is, until Cornelius spoke again.

“Are you embroidering to strengthen your equipment too? Or are you thinking of the future?”

The word “future” made my heart thump as images of a wife embroidering her husband's cape immediately came to mind. I was practicing with the future in mind—that much was correct—but what Cornelius didn't know was that I wished to embroider his cape in particular.

“Both, I suppose. I simply hope that my efforts do not go to waste,” I said in partial jest, mustering all of my energy to force a smile.

“I see,” Cornelius replied casually, again watching my fingers. “I don't think they'll go to waste. If you'll embroider my cape, that is.”

“Ahaha. That certainly would reward all of my hard work,” I said. *But I cannot, no matter how much I want to.*

I passed my thread through the cloth again. And again. And again. And then, I suddenly realized what Cornelius had just said to me.

“If you'll embroider my cape”? Wait. Hold on a moment. Was that...

He had said it so casually that I hadn't even realized his

intentions. I snapped my head up to look at him and saw that his eyes were already on me. There was nothing in his expression to suggest he had been joking—rather, he seemed troubled by the vagueness of my response.

“Erm... May I borrow your cape, then?”

“There are more people here than I thought...” Cornelius remarked. His voice tickling my ears brought me back to the present moment, and my heart continued to pound as I gazed down from where I was sitting atop his highbeast. There were several gazebos at the back end of the scholar building with highbeasts waiting outside of them, which indicated they were in use.

“This one looks like it has the best scenery.”

We stopped outside one of the gazebos and dismounted, at which point Cornelius took out a feystone and rested it atop the highbeast. By doing this, it wouldn't disappear even if something else distracted him and he stopped supplying it with mana. I had seen Lady Rozemyne rest feystones on her highbeast when it was filled with luggage, but the sight was still strange to me—one did not usually separate from one's highbeast.

The gazebos were fashioned from ivory stone, much like the Royal Academy, and were a little chilly as a result. However, this area alone had no snow, and thanks to the bright atmosphere of the flower gardens, the cold didn't feel quite as bitter.

Visiting a gazebo with one's lover was the kind of romantic act one could only do at the Royal Academy. I felt entirely as though I had become the protagonist of a story. Were Lady Elvira to write about this moment, the Goddesses of Spring would doubtless be dancing around Efflorelume the Goddess of Flowers.

“Leonore, is there really a need to sit so far away when it's just us?” Cornelius asked when I seated myself across from him. He gestured for me to sit beside him instead.

“Y-You may have a point,” I replied. I moved over, trying to sit next to him as naturally as possible, but perhaps I was a little too close. Cornelius didn't seem to be nervous at all, yet I felt as though steam were already blowing out of my ears. “Erm, Cornelius. About ditter practice next Earthday...”

I tried to focus our conversation on something familiar to regain my footing and distract from my nerves, considering that we were so close to one another and all alone. The problem was, the only topics I knew as well as the weather were training schedules and the feybeasts I was researching for the Interduchy Tournament.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Leonore, but shouldn't we use this opportunity to discuss things we can only talk about while alone?”

“Such as?”

“Well... the escorting during the graduation ceremony, or the engagement ceremony after we get back?”

More than a season had passed since Cornelius and I first became lovers, and in that time, I had prepared clothes to wear at the graduation ceremony and gotten ready for the debut to my relatives. We planned to have our engagement ceremony upon returning to Ehrenfest.

I've checked things over countless times while working on these preparations, but perhaps I've forgotten something?

The blood drained from my cheeks. There was little I could do to prepare at the Royal Academy. This wasn't the time to be relaxing at a gazebo.

“Have I failed to prepare something?” I asked. “Is there still time, or are we too late?”

“Oh, no. You haven't forgotten anything...” Cornelius said with a troubled expression and stopped me from standing up. It was relaxing to hear there was nothing I had overlooked. “You like *Royal Academy Love Stories*, right?”

“Indeed. As long as I'm not featured in its pages...”

“Then why don't we try to recreate one of the tales?”

“Hrm?”

I blinked as Cornelius used his spare hand to spread his cape. His dark eyes were narrowed ever so slightly in mischievous amusement, and when he brought his face closer to mine under the newly created shadow, I recalled *Royal Academy Love Stories*. There was a scene where the God of Darkness spread his cape and enveloped the Goddess of Light while they were both in a gazebo. No doubt he was recreating that.

“Might I hide you with my cape... my Goddess of Light?”

“If my God of Darkness wishes...” I replied. I couldn't imagine refusing him, but at the same time, I wasn't sure how to respond. I leaned against him nervously, and he embraced me as if enveloping me in his cape. His body was warm, and his mana felt exceptionally close.

“E-Erm, Cornelius...” I said. We certainly were in a comfortable position, but my embarrassment soon won out, and I pulled away from him, feeling an immense urge to flee and bury my face somewhere.

“Leonore,” he replied, shifting so that we were facing each other and showing me his right hand. Mana was concentrating on his palm as though he were about to produce his schtappe. It was a troubling sight; was he intending to mix his mana with mine even though we had yet to even exchange engagement feystones? Just what would our

parents say if they saw us like this?

“Do you not want to?” he asked.

“That question is unfair...” I retorted. How could I refuse when, ever since reading *Royal Academy Love Stories*, I had dreamed of mixing mana with him just like this?

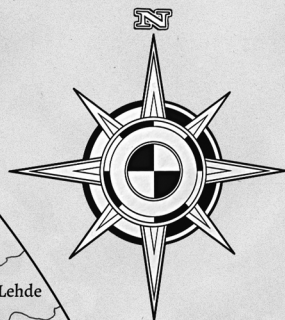
After swallowing hard at the idea of taking Cornelius’s mana for the first time, I slowly extended my own palm to the one outstretched in front of me.



(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

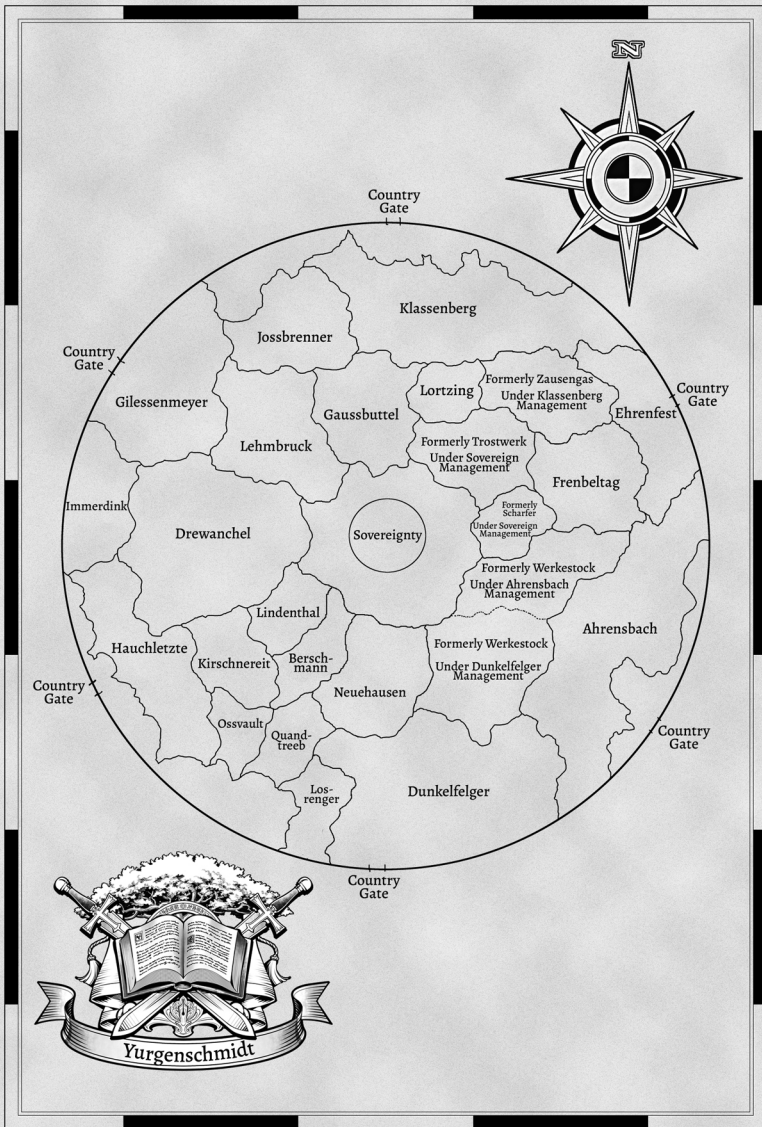
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★
Ehrenfest
Central District



Country
Border Gate

Ahrensbach Border Gate



Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Volume 7*.

One thing happened after another following Rozemyne's return to Ehrenfest, all the way up until the end of her second year at the Royal Academy. Strange text and an unfamiliar magic circle appeared when she thought it was reading time in the temple, an inquiry led to a bible comparison meeting, Aub Dunkelfelger challenged her to ditter during her first Interduchy Tournament, she ended up being the treasure in the game against Heisshitze, and terrorists and tennishbefallens appeared at the awards ceremony, which she then had to miss. There was also an air of tension between Ferdinand and Raublut the Sovereign knight commander.

As I was writing this volume, I couldn't help but think, "Gosh, there's just one annoying thing happening after another. I want to finish the Royal Academy and get out of there already." That said, when there are too many peaceful chapters in a row, I start begging for the next major event to arrive...

In any case, this volume's prologue is told from Hannelore's perspective, and it begins soon after Rozemyne collapsed at the tea party for bookworms. Time always jumps ahead when Rozemyne collapses, but this short story should allow you see what happens while she's not there.

The epilogue is told from Eglantine's perspective. As the fiancée of a prince, she had to stand among the front lines during the terrorist attack. The horrific event also triggers memories of past trauma, but the promise she makes with Anastasius after telling him her honest thoughts leads her to some very heartwarming realizations.

The short stories are told from Clarissa's and Leonore's perspectives. As the main chapters concluded on a more serious note, I wanted to make these more lighthearted. Both characters were escorted by graduating students and got to experience romantic meetings at the gazebos so famously mentioned in *Royal Academy Love Stories*... though not every couple is alike in how they use these opportunities. (Haha.)

In Clarissa's story, she fights with all she has to realize her ambition of serving Rozemyne as her retainer. I tried to show how unusual Rozemyne really is, and what kind of work Hartmut does in

the shadows for her. I also tried writing a romantic meeting between just Clarissa and Hartmut, but my husband ended up rejecting it, because it ended up becoming “an unruly stream of praise for Rozemyne that was hard to follow, basically impossible to empathize with, and more or less guaranteed to make readers’ eyes glaze over.”

Leonore, in contrast, stars in a more traditional love story. I show her thoughts as Cornelius confesses to her, and a meeting in a gazebo that would feel right at home in a new volume of *Royal Academy Love Stories*. This time, I got the following reaction: “It’s so embarrassing that it feels like someone’s tickling me! But that’s perfect. I love it!” Perhaps those who like shojo-esque romance stories will enjoy it.

Three characters received designs for this volume: Raublut, Immanuel, and Heisshitze. I quite like how Heisshitze’s face shows how much of a manly man he really is. Raublut and Immanuel both have very fitting appearances as well.

The cover art this time shows a stylized version of the Interduchy Tournament. Rozemyne and Ferdinand are walking around and absorbing the sights, while Anastasius and Eglantine represent the royals who were attacked. The way the expressions of those at the front contrast with the expressions of those at the back brings out the atmosphere of this volume very well. Thank you very much, Shiina-sama.

And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 8.

April 2019, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...

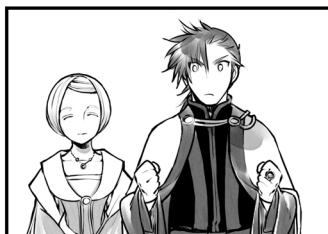
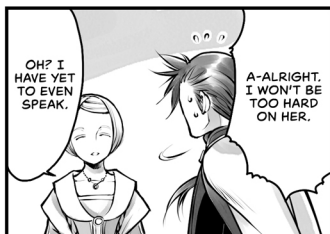
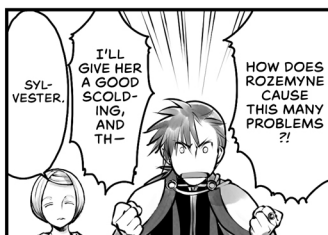
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

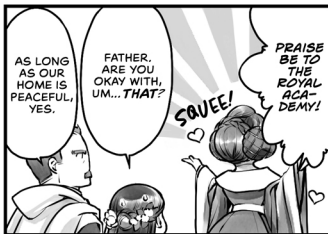
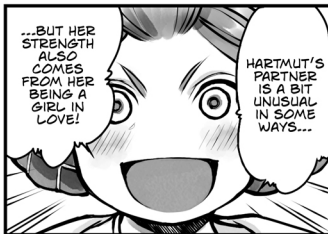
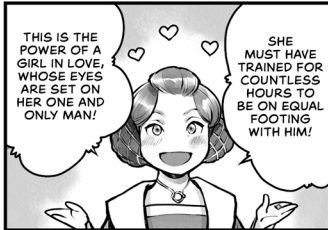
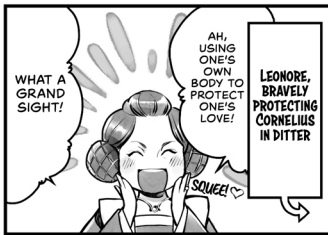
GWAAAH!
HIS ULTRA-
DANGEROUS
SMILE!
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MAXIMUM!

FEAR NOT,
ROZEMYNE.
I SHALL
PROTECT
YOU
WITHOUT
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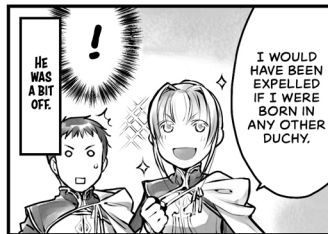
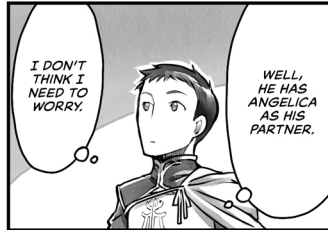
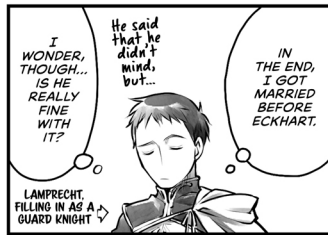


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LOVE TRAIN OFF THE RAILS



MUSCLE GIRL









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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal
Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 7
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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